

What Health Consumers Want from Online Resources

BY THOMAS C. LAWRY

There was a time when health care providers could dismiss the Web as a tool for communicating and interacting with patients and consumers. These days, data suggest that health care providers who ignore the Internet will, in turn, be ignored by consumers.

The Internet is the newest tool for empowering health care consumers. Eighty-six percent of adult American Internet users have gone online in search of health and medical information.¹ More Americans now turn to the Web for health and medical information than for sports scores, investment information, or shopping.² With 67 percent of American adults online, the Internet has a tremendous influence on the way people interact with their doctors and hospitals.³

Hospitals today have an incredible opportunity to embrace the online health care movement and provide better service to patients while improving how they operate. To do this, however, health care executives and planners must have a thorough understanding of why consumers are going online and what to provide at their facility's website.

Last November, the Pew Foundation published a groundbreaking study titled *The Online Health Care Revolution: How the Web Helps Americans Take Better Care of Themselves*. This report provides a comprehensive look at the interests and issues of those who go online in search of health and medical information and services. Following are important trends noted in the study in the behaviors of online health consumers. (Unless otherwise noted, all data cited are from the Pew Foundation study.)

HEALTH CONSUMERS ARE GOING ONLINE FOR MORE INFORMATION AND BETTER SERVICE

Health consumers are turning to the Web in record numbers because they want better, more easily accessible information than can be found from traditional sources.

Despite the best efforts of hospitals, cost-cutting measures are making the hospital experience



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more impersonal. Both health care providers and consumers feel that most patients are not sufficiently informed.

One study found that at least half of all Americans are not satisfied with the availability of their doctors or with the duration of their appointments with caregivers.⁴ Another study concluded that a major contributing factor to this "information gap" is the inability of physicians and caregivers to spend enough time with patients because of managed care performance pressures.⁵

Against this backdrop, the Web has become a valuable and cost-effective tool for hospitals to conveniently provide information to patients and consumers. Online health consumers appreciate being able to find information anonymously about an illness or services at any hour of the day.

Among those seeking health information online, 93 percent say that getting health information when convenient for them is important. Eighty-three percent of people who seek health information online say that they can get more health information online than from any other source.

Contrary to the myth that consumers can't find good health information online, 92 percent of health information seekers say the information they found during their last online search was useful. Fifty-five percent say access to the Internet has improved the way they get medical and health information (compared with their ability to get information from other sources such as their physician or hospital).

Anonymity is another great benefit that the Web provides. Health care consumers often go online for information about a sensitive topic that is difficult for them to talk about. Eighty percent say that getting this information anonymously is important.

ONLINE CONSUMERS WANT INFORMATION ABOUT SPECIFIC MEDICAL CONDITIONS AND TREATMENT OPTIONS

Although wellness information is a predominant feature on many hospital websites, 9 of every 10 health consumers go online for information relating to a physical illness affecting

themselves or a loved one. Three of 10 have gone online in search of materials pertaining to mental health. Only about 2 of every 10 health consumers go online for information about fitness and nutrition. Eighty-one percent say they learned something new when going online.

These data are particularly important to hospitals in planning an approach to Web services. Hospitals have an opportunity to provide materials about specific medical conditions as well as information about the various services to support health consumers and their families who are dealing with a specific medical condition.

The ability to access health and medical information on the Internet is having a positive effect on consumers taking responsibility for their health. Forty-eight percent of online health consumers say the advice they found on the Web has improved the way they take care of themselves.

ONLINE EXPERIENCES ARE ALTERING BEHAVIORS

A crucial point for health care leaders to understand is that health care decisions made by many consumers are being influenced by the health and medical information they find on the Web.

Almost half of those seeking information for themselves during their last online search say the material affected their decisions about treatment and care. Actions affected included whether to seek care, how to treat an illness, and how to question a physician.

ONLINE GENDER DIFFERENCES EXIST

Women are much more likely than men to seek online health information. When searching for online health information, they are most likely to seek out materials related to a specific illness and to conduct a search after a visit to the doctor's office. Women are twice as likely as men to be seeking health information for a child.

Men are more likely to seek information for themselves. They are more privacy conscious and more likely to read a website's privacy policy.

When it comes to feeling well-served, women are much more likely to express strong feelings about the benefits of health information being readily available online and the ability to tap into such information when it is convenient. Women are also more likely than men to worry about getting unreliable information from the Web.

HEALTH CONSUMERS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE QUALITY OF ONLINE HEALTH INFORMATION AND PRIVACY

The majority of Internet users are concerned about getting poor information online. When it comes to finding health information online, 82 percent are concerned about getting information from an unreliable source. Fifty-eight percent of

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those seeking information online look to see what organization is providing the advice or information that appears on a health-related website.

The need for a trustworthy source of information is a great opportunity for hospitals. Data suggest that online consumers are much more likely to trust online information provided by a local doctor or hospital.⁶

While hospitals are struggling with the murky issues of medical privacy, online health consumers have been clear that privacy is one of their main concerns. Within this area, the placement of medical records online is a hot topic among doctors, hospitals, and legislators. And although groups such as the American Medical Association endorse the use of online technology for medical records, the current sentiment of online health consumers seems to indicate that the public is not ready for such a move. Six of 10 Internet users think that putting medical records online is a bad idea; most believe that putting medical records online is more a threat to privacy than a benefit.

ONLINE HEALTH CONSUMERS ARE LOYAL TO WEBSITES THEY CONSIDER VALUABLE

Health consumers are routinely online in search of information and will likely develop loyalties to those sites (and their sponsors) that provide information and services that they consider valuable.

Six of 10 people who seek health information do so at least once a month. Those who go online at least once a month are also more likely to participate in an online support group, buy medical items online, e-mail their doctor, and describe a medical condition to get advice.

The Web has already altered the way consumers seek health information and interact with hospitals and doctors. Forward-looking health care organizations understand that online health consumers will eventually be in line for medical services. You have the unique opportunity of becoming the local market leader with Web services that enhance and extend your relationship with health consumers. Now the important question: What will you do to respond? □

NOTES

1. Harris Poll, Associated Press, August 18, 2000.
2. Staff, "Web Users Search for Medical Advice most Often," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 27, 2000.
3. "Surveying the Future," *UCLA Internet Report*, October, 2000.
4. Yankelovich Monitor, 1999, as reported by the Pew Foundation.
5. JAMA Patient Page: Patient-Physician Communication. *JAMA*, vol. 282, p. 2422, 1999.
6. "Cybercitizen Health Study," HealthCare Web Sites Study, 1998.

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