

Health Information Compliance Alert

Networking :Social Media Changes the Business Side of Medicine, Too

Take these cues from consultants, payers to beef up your marketing with Web 2.0.

The Internet and social networks -- Web 2.0 -- are changing medicine. Patients can hop online to rate their doctors, request prescription refills, check their medical records, or ask questions about their conditions. At sites like patientslikeme.com, they swap information and do their own research. Doctors and hospitals are beginning to reach out through telemedicine and virtual checkups.

But how do people on the business side of medicine use social networking?

Maria K. Todd, MHA PhD, a consultant and president of the Council on the Global Integration of Healthcare, uses Twitter, LinkedIn, and networks such as Ecademy and Xing to connect with clients, experts and colleagues, and "to monitor the industry sectors in which I am active."

It's been an unexpected blessing. Todd's consultancy and recognition has increased, and her revenues have increased by over \$80,000 in the last six months directly related to Web 2.0 efforts, she says.

"I didn't think that the Web 2.0 world could make much of a difference in my income or visibility," Todd says. "I was wrong. If you don't participate these days, people wonder why you're not with the cool kids on this."

Some of the ways Todd uses social media:

- To sponsor forums and share knowledge through webinars "both paid and complimentary."
- To announce articles, white papers, blog entries, and webinars, "especially if it involves a managed-care industry trend, new development, key performance metrics, or negotiation technique."
- To invite colleagues when an association sponsors a free, online educational program. "They are often free to participate if you have a microphone and speakers attached to your computer; otherwise, you pay for the long distance charges."
- Learning. "Much of my research these days includes info sourced from others' Web 2.0 activities," Todd says.

Social Media Has Some Hidden 'Costs'

One big advantage to Web 2.0: So many of its resources are free. Facebook is free, Twitter is free, and users can pay to upgrade service on LinkedIn, but it's not required.

Web 2.0 tools may be cheap, but networking online takes a lot of energy, Todd admits. She cites a deluge of email, questions, interview queries, and "hundreds of requests from start-up people each week who each want just a half hour of my time to run an idea by me -- without compensation."

"If I agreed to each [request], I would never have time for client work," she says. "I also would not have time to read journals, study case histories and stay current on the issues."

Todd sees the increased investment of her time into Web 2.0 as part of the price of doing business. "The more I help my clients research a problem, the more valuable and knowledgeable I become to them and those that follow," she says.

Todd's advice: Set healthy boundaries. "Pay it forward, but don't go bankrupt in time, energy, and resources," she says.

"I also make it a point never to use things like Twitter for noise, but instead reserve comments for things that are substantive," she says.

Reaching Out to Boomers

Social networking isn't just for consultants. Corporations like Humana have taken Web. 2.0 seriously, too.

Humana launched a social media site on April 4 for Baby Boomers, realforme.com, that provides information about money, travel, relationships, and health. The purpose: to raise visibility of the Humana brand.

The site allows the health benefits company to build a relationship with people who are 50 to 65 years old and will soon be facing decisions about which Medicare brand they will choose, said **Doug Bennett**, corporate communications consultant for Humana, in a news release. The site includes regular postings from expert bloggers and monthly newsletters. "It's a way to appeal to people who are aging into Medicare," he said. "It's a good entry way into this community."

Realforme.com is a long-term investment: "Once we become a valuable commodity to them in that space, they get the information, they build a relationship over time, [and] they find that we're dependable and trustworthy,

[and] when they have to make a decision about their Medicare product, hopefully we'll be in that consideration set," Bennett said.

Resources: Check out Maria Todd's Web site at www.askmariatodd.com. Check out Humana's Boomer community at www.realforme.com.