

Using Social Media to Enhance Your Primary Care Practice

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Primary Care Matters is a guest column written for MedStat by a local pediatrician or primary care provider.

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It was 2009, and the novel Influenza virus, H1N1, was scaring the nation. An unprecedented number of calls flooded our practice from parents worried about what they were hearing and reading in the news. Needing to widely and efficiently share current, reliable information with patients, our practice's Facebook page — COPC - Step by Step Pediatrics — was born.

It's hard to remember a time when Facebook and other social media platforms were not our primary sources for news, information, and communication. Parents, especially mothers, are heavily engaged on social media. Over the nearly ten years of managing our practice's Facebook page (and its offshoots, Step by Step Wellness, and What's McClellan Cooking?), I've learned about building and maintaining a medical social media community. Whether your practice hasn't yet taken the plunge or if you're already engaging patients via social media, read on for ways to use it to enhance your practice.

WHY your practice should use social media:

1. Social media is a fantastic way to share information with patients outside of usual office visits. On Facebook we post flu clinic dates, changes in office hours, or sign-ups for CPR classes. More importantly, we share educational content with parents. Some content relates to medical topics currently in the news (recent posts have addressed teething gels, summer safety, Fortnite, and vaping). Some content reaches parents long before they need it (eg. information on HPV vaccination), so they know our stance on topics often years in advance.
2. An active social media presence allows your practice to share its personality and point of view. A quick scroll through our page



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demonstrates that we are big on: healthy nutrition, outdoor play, vaccinations, mental health, safety without helicoptering, realistic and sane parenting, and community outreach. It also (I hope!) conveys that we are down-to-earth and approach many things with a sense of humor. Some parents may gravitate toward this; others may not. Regardless, it lets families know our atmosphere and style.

3. Social media allows you to direct the conversation on current hot mainstream media topics. We all know that medical headlines can be sensationalized or taken out of context by the morning talk shows and popular media. This can quickly spiral in spreading misinformation or panic amongst moms' groups or other social media communities. Physicians can use social media to vet, interpret, correct, or confirm information in the lay press and quickly share our take on it. This saves time and telephone calls from concerned parents.
4. Social media is free marketing for your practice. Gone are the days where a phone book is used to choose a provider or service. People turn first to social media and the web for recommendations and information. If your practice lacks an online presence, you may lose these opportunities for new patients and practice growth.
5. Social media is a truly fun way to engage families outside of the office. In addition to medical advice, we share a fair amount of parenting advice on Facebook. This helps create a sense of community amongst our families, letting them know we're all experiencing similar trials and tribulations. It can also improve communications and the doctor/patient relationship globally.

follow many pediatric and medical pages as well as parenting pages, making it easy to directly share content from my phone.

2. That being said, if you're motivated, create and share original content. From writing a blog post to creating video content or answering patient questions via Facebook Live, sharing original content can engage and sustain an audience.
3. Use pictures, videos, and infographics ... a good one really is worth 1,000 words. When one scrolls through her social media feed, the eye is drawn to pictures or movement more so than merely words.
4. Have a plan for collecting and sharing content. Certain content I read and share immediately (public health alerts, anything that is causing an uptick in office phone calls). Most content, though, I browse and save, either in a designated email folder or with Facebook's save function. Twice/week, I read the articles saved, choose what to share, then schedule the publication date/time. This allows me to efficiently and regularly share ample quality content.
5. Enlist a trusted staff member to post non-medical content. Our office manager serves this role, sharing updates such as phone problems, lost and found items, or employment opportunities.
6. Promote your social media channels wherever and whenever possible. Share a simple "Like us on Facebook" in exam rooms, bulletin boards, billing documents, practice handouts. Display social media links on your website. If you utilize multiple platforms, link the content from one platform to the other(s).

HOW your practice can use social media effectively and efficiently:

1. Use content from trusted sources. I share information culled from my email inbox (Nationwide Children's updates, SmartBriefs, Medscape) and my personal Facebook feed. I

Pitfalls to AVOID with medical social media:

1. Do not violate HIPAA. Do not post about specific patients or post images of patients without following your practice's/organization's privacy and consent policies.



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2. Have a plan for responding to personal friend requests or private messages from patients. With social media, the line between physician and “friend” can be easily blurred. Set consistent boundaries.
3. Do not (or minimally) engage angry or misinformed people commenting on your posts. Social media can get ugly quickly on topics ranging from vaccination to breastfeeding to sleep training. Patients may turn to social media to vent frustration with office wait-time or an unpleasant interaction with staff. In addressing misinformation, have a polite reply that briefly restates the medical evidence. For anger, have a set reply that acknowledges the commenter but directs them to your office manager who can handle their concerns offline.

For better or worse, social media is where people turn for information and advice. It can be an effective, fun way to engage patients in evidence-based, medical topics and share your viewpoint on important issues. With some planning, this can be a value-added service for your practice.

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