

ASK THE EXPERT ... ANDREA FISHMAN

Question: In Today's Economy, What e-Strategies Should Be Deployed to Engage and Convert Consumers?

The current U.S. economy has prompted Americans to re-evaluate their consumption patterns. People are feeling the squeeze, and necessities like healthcare that were once immune to financial compromise are sometimes given the same spending consideration as traditional discretionary goods and services.

The online audience measurement service comScore reported that as early as July 2008, 20 percent of Americans had cut back their spending on medical needs, and 32 percent had cut back on health- and beauty-related expenses. Tough economic times force consumers to make tough choices. With the economic prognosis not looking any better in the near term, effective and measurable lead generation strategies will be crucial for healthcare providers and health plans to connect and engage patients in a Web 2.0 world.

Meet 'Patient 2.0'

The Internet is the ultimate tool of empowerment for consumers. They can price shop, review feedback, and seek advice for virtually any product or service purchase. So how does the healthcare community engage the e-patient and stay top-of-mind? The first step is to understand Patient 2.0 members, their needs, their behaviors, and how you can reach them.

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The Patient 2.0:

- Shares information and experiences in patient Web communities.
- Uses search engines to research health information and statistics.
- Browses healthcare review sites such as the federal government's Hospital Compare.
- Checks symptoms on online health resources such as WebMD.
- Signs up for mobile health alerts.
- Exchanges e-mails and receives e-newsletters from hospitals or physicians.
- Schedules appointments or e-visits online.

Reach Patient 2.0

Reaching 2.0 consumers across different referral touch points is important, as differing channels complement one another. Here are some online marketing essentials to consider:

- Search engine strategies (SES) are crucial to engaging the nearly 150 million U.S. adults that, according to Harris Interactive, used online search for health information in 2008. Whether your search is organic or paid, these strategies are important for driving traffic to your Web site and are something that you need to invest in – if you haven't already.

Most people begin their research about a new topic by going to the Internet. If you can capture their attention during their research,

through SES, you can leverage your content and become the "expert" on the topic, giving them an incentive to use your services or return when they are ready.

- Pay-per-click (PPC) campaigns allow you to invest in targeted ads that will give you exposure to current and potential patients on the Web sites that they frequently visit, increasing the likelihood of conversions. You can reach them on their favorite health blog, e-zine, patient forum, social networking site, and even through e-mail.

PPC campaigns can often fill the gaps in your organic search efforts. What is often overlooked is keeping the conversion point – the right site and message to reach your customer – simple. Don't make prospects think too hard!

- E-newsletters provide a great way to collect data about current and prospective patients and deliver targeted content. Along with e-mail alerts and mobile text messages, e-newsletters are one more way to stay connected and top-of-mind.
- An affiliate marketing program, with incentives from a third-party partner, is also a successful practice to capture e-patients' attention and collect their data from forms and questionnaires.

Engage Patient 2.0

Patient 2.0 members want to be involved in a robust experience. They want to feel appreciated and feel that their opinions are valued. As comScore research points out, they

are also increasingly using coupons and hunting for deals online.

Here are some suggestions for how healthcare strategists can engage connected, socially networked, and value-driven consumers:

- **Creative promotions.** Retailers and manufacturers are feeling the economic squeeze more than most, and the savvy ones are getting more aggressive and creative in their promotions and marketing efforts. Colgate-Palmolive has an entire section of its Web site dedicated to coupons and other special offers. Gap invites customers to become silver card members to qualify for free shipping on all orders. Although some efforts may not cross industry borders, healthcare organizations would do well to observe the successes and failures of those companies that pursue these initiatives.

One example especially relevant to the healthcare industry is St. Francis Regional Medical Center in Shakopee, MN, and its twist on a ladies night out. The hospital promotes mammogram parties on the home page of its Web site (www.stfrancis-shakopee.com).

Mammo parties serve up a mammogram and complimentary chocolate-dipped strawberries, wine, massages, and manicures. St. Francis partners with local businesses that donate their services. Participants need only an insurance card and a prescription for a mammogram.

- **Social media.** A recent study conducted by the Society for New Communications Research, using 300 active Web consumer interviews, revealed that 81 percent of respondents believe that blogs, online rating systems, and discussion forums can give consumers a greater voice regarding customer care. A

2007 study conducted by comScore, with the Kelsey Group, found that one out of every four Internet users consulted online reviews before paying for a service delivered offline. That same study reported that 76 percent of the 2,000 respondents made a medical service decision that was influenced by online reviews.

Doctors who are willing to blog about their specialty can be a boon to building consumer and customer relationships. Encouraging feedback from your patients and community can generate new ideas and open the communication channel with dissatisfied but silent customers.

The patient experience does not have to be restricted to appointments and visits, either. Online communities and lifestyle sections on everyday concerns such as heart-healthy foods, dieting, and physical activity can also engage and build relationships with customers.


Once your patient engagement areas are up, you can leverage your e-mail lists to populate your communities and stimulate activity. With a little time, a small database of patients can become quite sizable.

- **The individualized patient experience.** Personalized content is crucial to grabbing and holding the attention of your desired audience, and it is a good way to differentiate your services from competitors online. Common practices can help personalize your Web site. For example:

- Provide the capability to create an online profile.
- Enable searches for specific physicians or services.
- Showcase recent and relevant news.

- Highlight recognitions and awards.
- Allow users to make appointments.
- Display physician profiles.
- Post relevant videos.
- Offer sign-ups to receive mobile alerts and newsletters.

Patient 2.0 is online, sharing information with peers from all over the world on community sites and praising or disparaging experiences with doctors, treatments, medications, and hospitals. Having your healthcare services on a relevant review site is a cost-effective and valuable way to interact with patients and create leads through word-of-mouth. Be warned, however, because the feedback you get may not always be what you wanted or expected.

Today's patients are more informed than ever, thanks to the first generation of health information Web sites. The key is to know what users need and what they want from their portals of choice, and then to be able to deliver on those desires. Armed with Web 2.0 tools, Patient 2.0 is especially savvy. 

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