

White Paper

Web Effectiveness for Healthcare Marketers – Creating Conversations that Matter

SYSTEMSALLIANCE

Think Big. Work Smart.

Abstract

Over 145 million adult Americans go online for health information¹. From the perspective of the modern healthcare consumer, a dynamic, interactive Web presence is a leading indicator of an organization's perceived legitimacy, and prospective patients actively use a provider's Website to help them make important decisions about where to seek care.

Today's healthcare marketers need to adopt a consumer-centric approach to the Web that ensures their site visitors get the information they need and have a positive first experience with the institution that may save their lives.

To help hospital marketers attract, engage and better meet the needs of Website visitors, this paper examines how consumers are using the Web for gathering health information and provides actionable ideas for improving Web effectiveness.

¹ http://www.manhattanresearch.com/newsroom/Press_Releases/over-145-million-consumers-online-for-health.aspx

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Healthcare Marketing Challenges – Current State

Over the past decade, the “consumerization” of the Internet has fundamentally changed the way we search for and select healthcare providers and facilities. Web presence is mandatory; effective Web presence is crucial as a competitive advantage.

One of the most significant challenges to establishing an effective Web presence for healthcare organizations is structuring content in a meaningful way for visitors. Because healthcare is now intensely competitive, with patients often having options about where they seek care, healthcare institutions must differentiate themselves with high-quality information and services that engage the visitor in an online conversation with the institution.

For many institutions, the process of creating online relationships is complicated by their size, decentralized nature and departmental diversity, with numerous competing interests and multiple stakeholders. Marketers must balance visitor engagement with their overall objectives of establishing brand preference, maintaining brand consistency, supporting revenue goals and providing superior customer service.

Finally, as healthcare consumers become better informed, they are seeking a broader range of online services and interactions, often using their Web experience as a criterion for evaluating the entire institution. The patient experience is the brand experience – and it starts with your Website.

Creating and Managing the Online Conversation

Think about a visitor’s experience with your Website as a conversation – an exchange between the visitor and the provider. As a marketer, how can you structure this conversation in a way that puts the consumer in the center? And how can you move that conversation beyond simple transactions or passive interaction to one that is active and relational?

To lay the ground work for establishing this relationship a healthcare marketer should:

- Create a strategy for the conversation
- Develop content that drives the conversation
- Guide the conversation
- Select the tools that enhance the speed, ease and convenience of the relationship
- Use social media to continue the conversation

Create a strategy for the conversation

Web strategy begins with an understanding of the needs and personas of your desired target visitors. Think carefully about the content and services each visitor needs and the tasks they will want to accomplish. These outcomes guide site design, navigation and the interactive features that engage visitors. A large healthcare organization will have multiple audiences – patients, physicians, researchers, prospective employees, donors – with multiple needs for information and engagement. Answer the question, “if I was a patient coming to the site, what would help me the most?” Do the same for your other target audiences.

Develop content that fits the strategy

When you understand your visitors and their reasons for visiting the site, creating messaging and content gets easier. With the Website visitor at the center, look around 360 degrees for the types and sources of content that make sense. Don't just ask what information people want to receive, think about how they want to receive it. For example, a patient coming to the site may do so with a sense of urgency and heightened emotions. They'll want answers and information quickly and in language that is easy to understand. Remember again that the audience is at the center of the conversation and develop content that addresses their needs and keeps them involved.

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Guide the conversation

Once a visitor comes to your site, it is up to you to structure and guide the conversation to a satisfactory outcome. This can be accomplished through navigation, calls-to-action, visual elements or short directive copy. Here are two examples from Johns Hopkins Medicine.

First, Hopkins uses a short text element: “Explore Johns Hopkins Medicine” which exposes a drop-down menu (figure1) that provides contextual navigation for several categories of site visitors, including: prospective patients, med students, researchers, donors, media and staff.

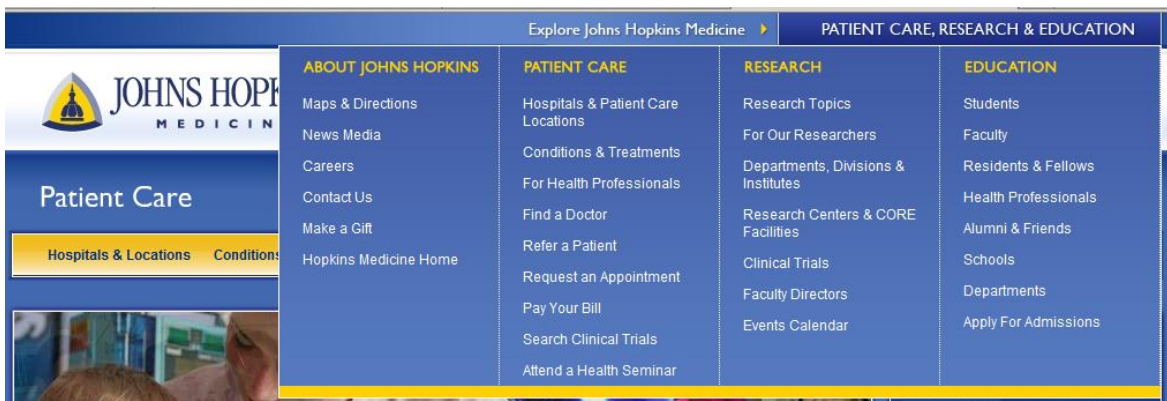


Figure 1

Second, Hopkins offers action-oriented navigation (figure 2) specifically for patients and prospective patients – the visitors which drive the most value for the institution – directing them to the services they are most likely going to need to move their relationship with Hopkins forward.



Figure 2

Increasingly, hospitals are prompting visitor interactions through Web forms. From online bill payments, appointment setting and referral requests to second opinions, forms must provide your site visitors with insight about how your institution will respond to form submissions. For example:

Use this form to submit your non-emergency medical question to a nurse practitioner. Someone will call you within 24 hours. If you have an emergency, please call 911.

An important aspect of the exchange with visitors is to provide insight into the process and how they're involved. Make sure the conversation moves in a way that delivers the information the visitor is seeking.

Tools that can be used for speed, ease and convenience

A user-centric interface combined with relevant content will optimize the visitor experience. For example, as illustrated by the Johns Hopkins drop-down menu (figure 1), organizing navigation by visitor type and presenting visitors with direct access to content they are most likely looking for has a significant impact on the user experience. In practical terms, enhanced navigation improves usability and decreases bounce rates as visitors are more likely to find the content they're looking for.

Technologies such as a content management system (CMS) can help automate the creation of dynamic and consistent navigation schemes. These tools are especially useful for helping hospital marketers maintain brand consistency and enforce content quality standards. However, it is important to see technology as a tool for facilitating the conversation with the audience. Many marketers get excited about the technology and all the cool things they can do with it and lose focus on the ultimate goal of meaningful engagement between the visitor and the site.

Use social media to continue the conversation

Consumers are increasingly using social media to learn about treatment options, find prospective healthcare providers, compare outcomes and cope with their healthcare issues. Social media has gained so much prominence that these conversations will happen with or without the healthcare marketer's involvement. Connections to relevant social media sites from your own Website will help guide the visitor to the right forum where conversations can begin and continue.

In addition to channeling conversations from your Website, you may need to insert yourself into relevant online conversations on other sites. Avoid the "big brother" approach and tread cautiously when responding to negative comments; aim to be helpful, available and concerned. But don't let these outside conversations occur without you; it's better to proactively address them than let them spiral too far out of control.

Taking Your Web Presence to the Next Level – Why Content Management Matters

It's become essential for healthcare marketers to invest significant time and resources toward making their institution's Website a destination for quality information and meaningful conversation. Managing the scope and breadth of today's healthcare sites to accomplish these goals requires a content management system (CMS) which enables broad participation from subject matter experts – who may have little technical expertise – from across your organization. This should be coupled with a host of other features which ensure:

- Brand and content integrity, through work-flow and content auditing
- Accessibility and privacy compliance
- Content personalization and categorization
- Integration with other applications and tools used by your institution
- Web publishing on mobile devices
- Support for customization to meet evolving requirements

According to the Association for Information and Image Management (AIIM.org) a CMS is defined as a system “that helps in maintaining, controlling, changing and reassembling the content on a Web page...The user interacts with the system at the front end through a normal Web browser. From there he can edit, control parts of the layout and maintain and add to the Web-pages without any programming or HTML skills.”

Let's look at what healthcare consumers are doing on the Web and how a CMS can help your marketing team structure and guide the online conversation.

Consumers are seeking information on health, wellness, symptoms, disease and medication.

You are likely dealing with an immense amount of data and a wide range of visitors, so your CMS must:

- Index, archive and provide an audit trail for thousands of pages of information
- Enable effective searching for all content types used on your site.
- Connect seamlessly with content repositories (through open standards or APIs), to dynamically render the stored documents and assemble content for presentation in the format required by your visitors, e.g., desktop, mobile device, printer, etc.
- Present content in a manner compliant with established standards, such as Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act or [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0](#).
- Segment and categorize content for automated display and delivery to appropriate visitors.
- Support personalization, so that repeat visitors can be presented with information that is more meaningful based on what they've viewed previously.

Consumers are performing specific research on your institution's physicians, capabilities, facilities and procedures. Your institution needs to appear at the top of popular search engine results, and facilitate navigation once the visitor arrives at your site. Your CMS must:

- Support best practices for on-page search engine optimization, such as embedding keywords in browser and page titles, header tags (H1 – 6), page content, image alt text and links, as well as the page URL.
- Enable the development of content-rich microsites that highlight specific capabilities, classes or activities occurring at your institution, while remaining consistent with the overall brand identity of the site.
- Provide context-sensitive navigation that directs the visitor to additional items of interest based on what they are currently viewing.
- Gather and display profile information that is edited and submitted by the individual profile owners.

Consumers want to engage with your institution for self-service operations such as scheduling, payment and intake. Most large institutions and many small ones will have back-office systems that facilitate these functions. But to support them, your CMS should:

- Streamline form creation and meet privacy requirements for results handling.
- Enable secure log-in so registered users can access secure content, perform certain tasks or retrieve personal information.
- Connect to back-office systems, such as those for finance, scheduling and intake.
- Facilitate customization for specific functions or procedures used by your institution.

Consumers may want to participate in a community based around your organization and offer their opinions and feedback. Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, discussion forums, etc., are all part of the extended conversation occurring in the social media ecosystem. For an integrated and consistent experience, your CMS must:

- Let you add blogs to your Websites and provide the mechanism for managing blog posts and comments.
- Allow “send to a friend” functionality for a visitor to send page content via an email message to any address.
- Support easy integration with discussion forums or other feedback mechanisms
- Interface with social network sites so that visitors can easily share content via Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or other sites.

Finally, your CMS is the mechanism you’ll use to promote and enforce brand consistency across your institution. You’ll also rely on it to enable your internal audiences to connect with your external audiences without conflict or competition. The true value of a CMS is to empower the message-crafters to become effective message distributors.

Measuring Success

One of the benefits you gain by building your Website on a CMS is a mechanism for enabling constant improvement. As with any marketing initiative, you determine at the outset what the quantitative success criteria should be and put the analytical tools in place to measure them. Here are some tips:

- Measure the parts and the sum – Evaluate individual marketing activities at a micro-level as well as the integrated campaign at a macro-level. Embed analytic tracking codes on your page templates so you capture page and site-level metrics, such as unique and repeat visitors, bounce rate, time spent on pages as well as the entire site, click-through rate and other measures that help drive ROI and continuous improvement..
- Look out for your reputation – Count the number of comments and conversations online that don't belong to you but that refer to your brand. Are there more positive than negative ones? Choose a spokesperson from your organization who will proactively look for dissatisfied patients and respond politely to deflect negative mentions of your brand. Ask your satisfied patients to post reviews on the same third-party Websites. If third-party Websites are referencing your site, then you know your messages are penetrating Internet "noise."
- Ask for feedback – Offer information that will entice your Website visitors to stay awhile, come back often, and most importantly take action. What do they think about the information you are offering them? Providing visitors with a way to rank, rate and comment on your site are great ways to gauge its effectiveness.
- Coordinate for the seasons – Healthcare is an industry where seasons and climates play dominant roles. Do you notice increased traffic to your site during flu season? Offer prominent links to relevant seasonal information on your homepage and closely track click patterns of visitors. Use key-word rich content about viruses and diseases – and related vaccinations, treatments and cures – to optimize your site for organic searches on Google, Yahoo! and Bing. While it may be nearly impossible for a small medical practice to rise to page one on a search for "H1N1," you can track your climb to higher positions as an indication that your information is fresh and relevant.

Conclusion

Focusing on the impact of your Web brand will drive differentiation of your services, physicians and care perceptions from your target market. In healthcare reputation has always hinged on relationships between patient and provider. Relationships build trust and influence reputation – the golden keys to successful branding. A CMS is an essential tool for creating and maintaining your Website as a platform for your healthcare brand.

There are many choices when it comes to selecting a CMS, and many that could potentially meet your needs. To help you make the most of your investment in this technology, it helps to partner with a Web consultancy experienced with the ins-and-outs of content management systems, and, more important, capable of translating your brand and business requirements into an effective Web experience for site visitors – and your colleagues responsible for creating and maintaining your Website.

Systems Alliance has assisted numerous healthcare clients with the implementation of SiteExecutive, a CMS that reduces the complexity, cost and effort of building highly effective Websites for organizations of all sizes. SiteExecutive gives non-technical personnel the means to create, manage and deliver Web content, while enforcing compliance with organizational processes, branding guidelines and industry best practices.

To learn more, please visit: <http://www.siteexecutive.com>.

Seven Ways to Grow Your Online Conversation

Spread Knowledge. In addition to attracting new patients, your Website should help educate your existing patients. Since the trend is for patients to seek information on the Web before seeing a doctor, give your patients plenty of reasons to make your Website their go-to source.

Build Trust. Promote departmental information and detailed physician biographies on your Website. Go beyond the simple photo and list of medical degrees. Consider having your physicians write their own content about their personal healthcare passions and areas of expertise. Include links to other trustworthy Website resources. This unique, keyword-rich content will also help with search engine optimization.

Be Clear. Provide plain English explanations of what patients can expect during common tests or procedures. Information that is easy to understand will help manage expectations and ease anxieties. Always remember that care and compassion are important elements prospective patients' value.

Make It Easy. Incorporate downloadable documents in PDF format for patients who prefer to print and read. Also include multi-media formats such as short videos and podcasts for patients with disabilities or those who simply favor watching or listening to advice.

Increase Convenience. Take a lesson from the airline industry where passengers can check in online before they arrive at the airport. Launch a Web or mobile app that lets patients "get in line" online or advises them of the wait time they'll encounter at your clinics.

Encourage Participation. Get existing patients to rate your services on third-party sites. Not only can this improve the visibility of your brand, but inbound links from other Websites help boost search engine ranking. Sure, you can't control what patients say, so be prepared to take the good with the bad. Designate a spokesperson from your organization to monitor and respond to comments.

Be Transparent. If you build a social media presence through a site like Facebook, make sure you understand the etiquette and protocol of those sites. Remember that something posted on the site can't be taken back later. Advise representatives of your healthcare institution to practice transparency, with common sense about sharing personal information. Be sure to promote your Facebook and other social media pages on your Website, email marketing and other relevant on- and off-line communications.

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About Systems Alliance

Systems Alliance, Inc., founded in 1993, is a Maryland-based company that provides business and technology consulting services to some of the nation's best-known hospitals, health systems and medical schools, including Geisinger Health System, Johns Hopkins Medicine, Medical University of South Carolina, WakeMed Health & Hospitals and Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. Systems Alliance has local offices in Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. To learn more, visit <http://www.systemsalliance.com>.

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