

3 Steps to Avoid the Risks of Medical Staff on Social Media

SOCIAL MEDIA

Business owners, medical staff, employees, patients, and family members can all benefit from social media. However, it's important to understand the risks involved and take steps to protect your practice.

WHO WE ARE?

WHAT WE DO?



In my last post, I briefly touched on the value of social media for promoting medical practices. As a tool, it's much more than just a business card on a web page; it's a dynamic platform for building your practice's brand, keeping in touch with your community, and building a network of professionals.

However, what about enabling employees to represent your practice on social media?

By allowing medical staff to represent their practice socially, a practice can dramatically amplify its reach. Staff benefit by cultivating their personal brands while growing their professional networks. It's not only a win/win for practices and staff alike, but it's also a more effective approach to social media than just posting self-promotional material on a branded page.

Part of what makes an employee-driven approach to social media so effective that it is authentic. We're more likely to trust the views of real people over those of marketers trying to sell us something. Social media allows us to be transparent, which can be an incredibly powerful form of word-of-mouth marketing.

As mentioned in the video below, about nine out of ten people don't trust advertising – but nearly eight of those ten trust the recommendations of people.



“...Social media, the opposite of advertising, is authentic. It is real,” Mark Burgess, a professor of Rutgers University, says in this TEDx Talk. “Maybe sometimes, too real. It’s transparent.”

While the transparency that social media gives us is valuable in building trust, it can be equally dangerous. This is especially true in medical professions, where issues like patient privacy are constant concerns. In this post, I'll discuss how to avoid some of the problems in allowing medical staff to represent a practice on social media.

Establish a social media policy

The first step in safely using social media is to establish a clear, written social media policy that dictates what is and is not acceptable to post. This policy should be clearly communicated and enforced – otherwise, it might not amount to more than a piece of paper.

Some common elements of social media policies for medical practices includes items such as:

1. Anything confidential or proprietary should never be considered acceptable, even through private channels of communication such as direct messages.
2. Staff should make their affiliation with your practice known when relevant, as well as make it clear that their opinions are their own when applicable.
3. Be aware that the use of social media, even for non-clinical reasons, can impact the public's trust in physicians and the practice.
4. Avoid any content that could be considered harmful (i.e. oversharing, harassment, etc.) against patients, coworkers, or affiliates of the practice.
5. Staff should always remember that they are solely responsible for the consequences of their actions on social media.

These guidelines are invaluable in preventing behaviors that might negatively reflect your practice. For more tips on writing a social media policy, check out [this post](#) on PhysiciansPractice.com.

Maintain privacy on public *and* private channels

It's never safe to assume that anything posted on social media is safe from the wrong eyes – even in private channels such as Facebook's private messages or Twitter's direct messages. If members of your practice use social media to communicate with coworkers, such as in a Facebook group, they could be treading into dangerous territory.

"Groups work well for organizing committees, for departments in businesses or for groups of friends trying to put on an event," Jeanine Guidry said during [a GWU webinar](#) on social media. "But they don't work well as the business card on Facebook for an organization."

When any message sent is a click away from being copied and shared, employees create unnecessary risk by discussing patient-confidential or proprietary information. The safest policy is that if you wouldn't share it publicly, don't share it at all. As employees increasingly use social media to collaborate with their peers, guidelines must make it clear what kind of information is permissible even in private communications.

Establish personal and professional guidelines

It is especially important that physicians keep their personal and professional lives separate. A professional page can be a great way to connect with patients, but a personal page containing potentially inappropriate content could endanger the patient-physician relationship.

However, even a strictly professional page is at risk if expectations aren't made clear.

While telehealth is a rapidly growing field, it is important that patients and employees make no mistake that social media is not an appropriate channel to provide professional medical advice. If your employees post health-related content, encourage them to include a disclaimer on their profiles specifying that their posts should not be considered professional medical advice. Patients with concerns about their health should be encouraged to schedule an appointment, or visit an emergency room if they have urgent needs.

Find more advice on the ethics of maintaining the patient-physician relationship in this policy paper by the American College of Physicians.

Does your medical practice allow its staff to represent the practice on social media? What kind of social media policy do you have in place? Share your thoughts and experiences with a comment below.

About the Author



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