

Digital and Social Media Marketing: Potential to Leverage Healthcare Communication

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ABSTRACT

Social media is emerging since 2004 and a growing percentage of consumers use this technology for health related reasons. The objective of this paper is to examine how organizations capitalize on social media to leverage their healthcare marketing efforts. This study uses secondary data to investigate the role of digital marketing in healthcare communication through social media. It also conducts a systematic literature review on use of social media by healthcare providers as a marketing tool. It was found that patient lifecycle can be divided into four categories: Discovery, consultation, outpatient and hospitalization. It reveals that these phases increase reach and helps in effective communication through digital marketing. The findings provide a useful platform for the healthcare providers to rethink on the issue of effective patient engagement through digital marketing channels. This paper will equip healthcare providers/managers/marketers with the skills they need to promote their company's product and services using social media. The findings can help the marketers to develop digital strategies for effective health communication. The paper provides insights into the emerging utilization of social media in healthcare marketing. However, the use of right digital strategy will be differentiating the grain from the chaff.

Keywords: Digital Marketing; Social Media; Healthcare; Communication; India.

1.0 Introduction

With the advent of “Web 2.0”, the strategies for health communication are also changing to match the increasingly evolving social media (Kietzmann, et al., 2011). Due to growth of digital culture in India, usage of internet has increased, so it is the right time for using social media marketing technologies (ibtimes.co.in).

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Digital marketing includes social media marketing, mobile marketing, affiliate marketing, search engine optimization, content marketing, search engine marketing, on-line advertisement, and on-line reputation management. Healthcare industry use digital marketing channels as they are inexpensive and effective way of marketing.

Social media is emerging since 2004 and a growing percentage of consumers use this technology for health related reasons. The *social networking sites (SNS)* are cost effective platform which helps in communicating with a large mass (Moorhead, S. Anne, et al., 2013). Organization can sustain through digital marketing channels instead of traditional marketing (Anand, Shweta, et. al., 2013). Social networking is thus two-way and implies direct communication that includes sharing of information between several parties (Eyrich, et al., 2008; Giustini, 2006).

Google and Compete Inc have conducted a research and they have found out:

- Approximately 84 Percent of the healthcare consumers search hospitals through both online and offline methods.
- Organic searches increased to 3 times
- To schedule an appointment, digital content can play significant role.
- Before visiting hospitals, patients uses internet to search the symptoms.
- Around 44 Percent patients prefer online booking of appointment and use mobile phones to visit websites of hospitals.
- Around 5 Percent consumers post their feedback on websites and 12 Percent post it on social networking sites.

2.0 Review of Literature

A number of studies stated the effectiveness of health intervention and communication through traditional media. It is found that public health through mass communication can be effective (Abroms and Maibach, 2008; Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Chou, et al., 2009; Cugelman, 2011; Dawson, 2010). Fox & Jones (2009) studies states that there is no remarkable changes in behavior through mass media campaigns. A number of reviews had shown that mass media communication can increase the level of awareness and can help in recalling of health messages. Web 1.0 applications like web pages, e-mails and other forms can change behavior in motivated volunteers. Present studies emphasized on common challenges in the use of mass media campaigns (Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Chou, et al., 2009).

However, the impact of technology is on global health services is very huge. The evolution of digital marketing and use of social media has fundamentally changed the

way of interaction in our society, engaging huge people both online and otherwise. Social media, is new media with a social focus, where information is shared with the purpose of networking. Chou, et al. (2009) opined that Social Networking Sites (SNS) like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter MySpace, and others allow individuals to instantly communicate with large networks of friends, colleagues and acquaintances, while using multimedia content linked to other social media platform such as YouTube. When relying on digital and social media for health related communication, it is necessary to first understand the general features of social media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content”. People can share, generate, receive and comment on social issues with the multi users on social media through multi-sensory communication (Heidelberger, 2011; Kontos, et al., 2010). Therefore, Social media acts as a communication channel that delivers a message, and involves asking for something.

3.0 Statement of Problem

The main objective of the use of digital marketing channel by Indian healthcare professionals is to reach larger population effectively. It was expected that social media will reduce the cost of advertisement and promotion activities and can reach to the customers effectively, but it also has the other side. These digital media are blamed for unreliable and meaningless content for specific patients and the marketers are not aware of the specific need of the customer. Patient engagement is a big challenge for the marketers. But the cost effectiveness, penetration and reach, direct-to-consumer communication happens because of social media, which should not be denied. When we consider digital marketing channels, we can find that the social media is widely used by the patients for searching and sharing of health information.

Considering all these views, we need to find out how marketers can use social media and digital marketing tools to achieve specific marketing objectives and to measure the effectiveness of digital strategies for healthcare communication.

4.0 Objectives of the Study

- To examine how organizations capitalize on social media to support their healthcare digital marketing efforts.
- To suggest few digital strategies for effective health communication.

5.0 Methods of Study

Secondary data were used through review of various articles, blogs, websites, book and journals. The papers included met the following selection criteria: published in a peer-reviewed journal, written in English, and full text available to the researcher.

6.0 Digital Marketing and Healthcare in India - A Conceptual Study

The IBEF report (<http://www.ibef.org/industry/healthcare-india.aspx>) stated that Indian healthcare industry is expected to grow at CAGR of 22.9 Percent during 2015-20 to US\$ 280 billion. Healthcare industry includes hospitals, private nursing homes, diagnostics houses, and pharmaceuticals, which constitutes 65 percent of the overall market.

As per report of Fortis Hospital (http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-12-02/news/44657410_1_healthcare-sector-healthcare-delivery), Indian healthcare industry is growing because income has grown up, health awareness has increased, lifestyle diseases has increased and access to insurance has been witnessed. The growth in mobile internet users is growing by 20 percent year-on-year and because of this the number of users accessed internet on their handsets will touch 185 million (<http://www.ibtimes.co.in/articles/532632/20140102/india--internet-users-mobile-association-iamai.htm>). This, along with digital marketing has stirred a revolution posing challenges and opportunities for Indian healthcare industries.

6.1 Growth indicators of healthcare industry

- Healthcare industry is expected to be at 1 Lac Cr by 2017
- 71 Percent of the hospitals accounts for the healthcare revenues
- 81 Percent will be the input by the private healthcare providers
- In the 12th five year plan, Rs.3000 Cr was planned for the development of the medical devices sector

6.2 Strength of India

Advantage of India is depend on its cost effective medical treatment and trained human resources. Other factors, such as drug management, low cost surgery and growth of clinical outsourcing (60 percent of the world's clinical trials are being outsourced to developing countries) makes the country lucrative for investment in healthcare.

6.3 Gaps to be fulfilled according to Infosys report on social media on healthcare

- 70 Percent healthcare infrastructure confined to top 20 cities.
- 1.8million beds needed to be reach the world average of 2.6 beds/1000 people
- 1.54 million Doctors required.
- 2.4million nurses required.
- India's healthcare spending is 1.2 Percent of GDP while the average spends by developed nations is 4 Percent.

Now consumers are no longer accepting the opinion of the doctors blindly, rather, they search for the hospitals, treatment process and services before visiting a hospitals. Healthcare has become interactive platform between the doctors and consumers, thus catering to the needs of digital marketing for hospitals (Anand, et al. 2013).

6.4 Role of digital and social media

As per the IBEF report (<http://www.ibef.org/industry/healthcare-india.aspx>), the role of digital media is growing and it can be seen by the whopping numbers:213 million internet users, 51 million Smartphone users, 115million Facebook users, 23million LinkedIn users, 55million YouTube users, 130million mobile internet users, 900 million mobile subscribers, 77million twitter users, 20million Google Plus users, and 8million Pinterest users.

6.5 Benefit of using social media

Social media can generate more available health information as users create and share medical information online. Blog sites create a space where individuals can access tailored resources to deal with health issues (Webb, 2004). For example, social media helps in health behaviour change such as smoking cessation, and enables patients to communicate with other patients and share information about health issues (Smith, 2007). Hornik and Kelly (2007) reported that people used health-related social networking sites to discuss sensitive issues and complex information with health professionals. The potential to reach target audiences is also a factor (Heidelberger, 2011), given that Facebook boasts the potential to reach over 500 million members of the exact audience you are targeting (Mangold, et al., 2009).

6.6 Digital marketing strategies

The key challenge for doctors and service providers in healthcare industry is to gain visibility in light of massive competition and create differentiation in consumers'

minds (https://www.socialbeat.in/helath_care_workpage). Therefore, it is important to implement digital marketing channels to get noticed, to increased patient traffic, to establish brand and to build brand loyalty. Digital marketing helps in maintaining reputation both offline and online, and proactively keeping in touch with the existing patient base in the most cost efficient way.

Healthcare organizations have to understand the patient lifecycle to devise effective strategies and how social media fits in it. To implement the strategies, patient lifecycle can be categorized into four phases (<http://C:/Document and Settings/user/Desktop/social-media/Infosys-Social-media-indian-healthcare>): *Discovery*: This is where the patient / customer is diagnosed with a condition / disorder he is feeling ill and has researched on the illness through traditional and online sources. *Digital strategies: Web Content Management* – The content must be enticing enough to capture consumers interest and attention. Relevant content about illness to be published by healthcare experts. *Digital Ads & Campaigns* – This targets relevant consumers based on their requirements by creating awareness and assisting in decision making. *Consultation*: Here, Customer has decided medical treatment and is weighing options of cost and quality.

Customers start searching hospitals, seek references, and take peer reviews and opinions before enquiring with the shortlisted hospital. *Digital strategies: Search Engine Marketing* – This allows products and services searched to be highlighted and ranked high during web searches. Ensure positive reviews; get experts to talk about brand. *Hospitalization*: The next stage is hospitalization. The customer is undergoing treatment and is associating the experience with other patients and is seeking second and third opinions from healthcare professionals.

Digital strategies: Listen to your patients and track who they are sharing their experiences with. Take necessary measures in real-time to ensure issues, if any are resolved to the customer's satisfaction to prevent negative sentiments from spiraling.

Outpatient: post completion of treatment, the patient is discharged and is now armed with considerable knowledge and experience about the detection, analysis and cure for the illness and condition diagnosed. He is looking to share this knowledge with other patients who are seeking advice on the topic.

Digital strategies: Social Media – Sharing experience on Facebook, Twitter, Blogging. Leverage influencers for your brand and convert them into advocates, tapping into their personal networks.

7.0 Results

The study conducted throws lights on current status of digital marketing strategies in the healthcare sectors. Healthcare organizations have to understand the patient lifecycle to devise effective strategies and how social media fits in it and for this, patient lifecycle can be categorized into four phases: discovery, consultation, outpatient and hospitalization.

8.0 Managerial Implications

The study will help healthcare providers to leverage their social efficacy through effective customer engagement, insights and technology capabilities and has a scope for formulating healthcare strategy to drive their business.

9.0 Conclusion

The paper provides insights into the emerging utilization of social media in healthcare marketing. However, the use of right digital strategy will be differentiating the grain from the chaff. Healthcare providers have to offer effective and efficient services through digital and social media to establish their brand.

10.0 Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research

In this paper the focus was on the use of digital and social media to make their brand visible and to reach out to the large population for effective healthcare communication. The study is limited to Indian context only and lacks the discussion of one of major issues, which is patient engagement through social media. It did not focus on the content management for effective communication. These problems can be addressed in future studies.

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