

# Guest Author Jamie Verkamp: Healthcare Leaders Recognize Social Media as a Way to Connect with Patients in the New Year

✘ With huge growth in 2009, social media is not just a passing trend used by online marketers; it's a real, effective method of communicating ideas, sharing information and connecting with people across all age and socioeconomic groups. Healthcare, while slower to adopt the social media wave than other industries, is coming to realize the potential social media tools provide to develop connections with patients, potential patients, along with other physicians and healthcare leaders around the world.

**What are some of the driving forces behind this explosion in popularity?** One reason is that as consumers, we're no longer trusting of advertising and we don't want to be marketed to, we want to be engaged, build a relationship, make the company earn our trust and hear our friends or family's review of their experiences. In fact, studies show that today, only 14% of people trust advertising, whereas 78% of people trust recommendations and referrals. Companies are using social media outlets to build relationships, trust and encourage recommendations and referrals from their engaged consumer base. As practice, hospital and physician growth are so strongly correlated to patient referral and recommendation volumes, it is only natural healthcare organizations look to social media outlets to continue to foster patient relationships and increase referral volumes.

**As of February 2010, where is the healthcare industry in its**

**adoption of this social media explosion?** Larger organizations and health systems are utilizing the power to connect, share and engage their patients. While, on average, smaller private physician groups and individual physician offices are still slightly hesitant and dipping their toes in the social media pool cautiously. One can understand why healthcare professionals do need to take a more strategic approach to interacting and engaging patients online with potential HIPAA privacy issues and other challenges looming. However, with a carefully crafted social media strategy, many health organizations are realizing the benefits of becoming more accessible in their marketing and reaching out to inform, educate and build trust with patients. According to Ed Bennett (edbennet.org) hospitals are currently at a 53% adoption rate, with 336 Facebook pages, 430 Twitter Accounts, 254 YouTube Channels and 70 blogs. In total, 557 health systems are reported to be participating in some capacity with social media, with the term "social media" encapsulating many forms and tools, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, LinkedIn, Flickr, and a number of patient forums.

**How are healthcare organizations using these tools effectively?** Let's focus on the top three tools currently adopted and being utilized in the healthcare social media sector.

**Facebook:** Physician practices and health systems alike are using Facebook as a dynamic, community-based website. It has become a place where physicians and leaders can post timely, organic or professional videos to educate patients and also connect on a more personal level. As a valuable resource for health information sharing, many organizations are taking the embarrassment out of sensitive subject matter and addressing specific medical problems, questions and issues for patients. Also, introductions to staff members and tours of the facilities are assisting organizations with connecting with their patients outside the four walls of their office and

building rapport before patients even arrive for their appointment. Practices are also encouraging patients to participate and engage on their site through discussions and contests. Private practitioners are more likely to start their social media strategy with just a Facebook Fan Page, while larger health systems and hospitals are embracing other social media tools in combination with Facebook in their initial strategy.

**Twitter:** Twitter is being adopted quickly by the larger health systems as a way to share information, publicize events like health screenings, fairs and clinics and also connect with other health organizations. I like to think of it as a public relations channel for these hospital and health systems. What's great is that in short, 140 character or less "tweets", these organizations are sharing a wealth of information to their patients and those patients are finding ways to access this health information and the system like never before. Overall the smaller, private practitioners are not as quick to adopt Twitter as they are a practice website or even Facebook, but many are starting to realize the benefits of utilizing this community as a way to share their expertise and knowledge, along with driving traffic to their websites.

**YouTube:** Healthcare organizations are using YouTube like their own, private television station that can be shared with millions of viewers across the world. Again, more popular amongst the larger health organizations, videos of procedures, interviews with clinicians, tours of new facilities and patient testimonials are being posted in a searchable, user-friendly manner to continue to enhance brand awareness, build trust and gain patient loyalty. This social media tool can be used much like Facebook, easing patient fears and answering tough or embarrassing questions. It can also give patients a visual insight into the facility so they know what to expect before arriving at an appointment or for a procedure. It can

act as an online referral source, highlighting patients that have had outstanding experiences and are recommending that organization to over a billion of their closest friends and family online. YouTube is the second largest search engine and healthcare professionals are quickly utilizing its power to share and connect with patients.

**The fact of the matter is** that for all industries, including healthcare, social media is both a curse and a blessing. Patients, who are now consumers with choices, can post content and interact freely with their physicians and their hospitals, sharing both outstanding experiences and negative experiences. Many health professionals are worried about their vulnerability, but social media is real life, online. As 2010 progresses, you'll be seeing more and more attention placed on social media by healthcare professionals and by the end of the year, it will be a necessity for organizations to be participating and engaging online, or be left out.

**For those organizations still looking to test the waters,** my best advice is to develop a clear and concise plan for your online activity. Think about your goals, who are you trying to reach and where are those patients connecting online? What resources do you have to allocate to this new marketing initiative? Will you keep your efforts "in-house" or look to a firm to help with the process? Who will manage this strategy once it has been developed? What legal implications must we bear in mind as we move forward to protect our patients' privacy? These are some of the questions that must be asked before ever jumping into the real-life world of social media. Remember, your patients want to feel engaged and interact with you; they are not looking to be marketed to, promoted to, or sold to. They want real information that can assist them in making important health decisions, while getting to know you and why you care about them as a patient. Use social media tools as a way to connect with your patients outside your office and build lasting relationships, keeping you on the top

of their mind. When you can make those types of connections with your patients and build loyalty, your organization will begin to see social media as an effective way to increase your referral and recommendation volumes.

***Thanks to guest author Jamie Verkamp, Director, Growth and Development of (e)Merge whose tagline is "Helping Medical Practices Grow". She can be reached by phone (816)326.8464 – OFFICE, (816)565.1657 – CELL, (816)474.0595 – FAX and can be reached electronically [email](#) | [web](#) | [twitter](#) | [facebook](#).***