

Social Media and the DNA of Healthcare

BY LEE AASE, MAYO CLINIC SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORK

Since the dawn of human history, social networking has helped people recover from illness. Through word-of-mouth they learned about folk remedies, and as science progressed and medicine became more useful, our ancestors increasingly sought treatment from doctors reputed to have successful track records, having learned about them from their satisfied (and surviving) patients.

Doctors likewise participated in analog social networking, traveling to observe others and eventually forming scientific associations where they would gather to present case studies. This eventually led to peer-reviewed publishing of research and development of guidelines and best practices.

This is the history of medicine in general, and of Mayo Clinic in particular. As the sons of Dr. William Worrall Mayo joined his practice in Rochester, Minnesota in the 1880s, it was the dawn of a golden age of surgery. Improved anesthesia made complex internal operations possible, and aseptic surgical techniques meant more patients survived to tell their stories.

The railroad and telegraph caused news of the surgical exploits of William J. Mayo, M.D., and his brother Charles H. Mayo, M.D., to spread rapidly. Soon the railroad began bringing patients from as far as New York and Montana, and upon their return home the word-of-mouth radius continued to grow.

Dr. Will and Dr. Charlie, as they became known, were committed to learning from

others, studying surgery in every town in the U.S. and Canada with populations of more than 100,000, as well as 25 countries from Australia and Argentina to Russia and Sweden. This travel was all by train and steamship, which further highlights their commitment to outreach and learning.

The brothers also welcomed physicians to Rochester to learn from them. Between 1908 and 1918, nearly 3,400 visiting physicians became members of The Surgeons Club, the informal association of those who had observed the Mayo brothers.

This history of old-fashioned, face-to-face social networking explains why Mayo Clinic was an early adopter of modern social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and why we're also committed to helping our colleagues learn to use these tools safely and effectively.

We see social media not as radical inventions, but as natural extensions of the way humans have always communicated.

So do your employees and patients.

Facebook now has more than two billion monthly active users worldwide. Almost five billion YouTube videos are watched every day, and 6,000 tweets are posted to Twitter on average every second. Health and medical issues increasingly are part of these conversations.

How should hospital leaders and board members respond? Recognize that:

- **Non-involvement is not an option.** Most of your employees have social networking accounts. Your patients are talking about your hospital online. You will be affected by what they say, so you need to at least be listening. As marketing consultant Danny Brown noted, ROI has an additional meaning related to social media: risk of ignoring. Just as you would not dream of operating a hospital without a telephone number, you shouldn't be absent from social platforms where your patients expect to communicate.
- **Opportunities are amazing.** Direct involvement in social media gives your organization a voice, which your employees, patients, and other stakeholders can amplify. You can use these tools to

Key Board Takeaways

Below are some tips for how hospital and health system boards can effectively apply social media tools in their organizations:

- Because of their prevalence in society, social media will affect every hospital, regardless of size, as employees and patients will be participating in these platforms.
- Hospitals should create employee guidelines and training programs so employees understand how organization policies apply in social media. Effective guidelines and training can help hospitals realize the benefits of social media while mitigating risks.
- Social media should not be considered in isolation, but integrated with other communication and marketing tools.
- Free templates and resources to aid in strategic planning and guideline development are available through the Mayo Clinic Social Media Network (MCSMN), at <https://socialmedia.mayoclinic.org>.

streamline and improve the practice, too. A YouTube video, for example, could provide educational information to patients that physicians otherwise would present individually. That face-to-face time can be better spent answering specific questions prompted by the video.

- **Risks are real.** Social media platforms are the communications equivalent of power tools. A chainsaw can do work much more quickly than an axe, but also can do much more damage if used improperly. Likewise, social media allows positive word-of-mouth to spread farther and faster than face-to-face conversation, but also can expose confidentiality breaches to many more people.
- **Guidelines are necessary...** Your hospital probably doesn't need a separate social media policy, but you do need guidelines for your employees to interpret how all other policies apply in the social media sphere. We have published our Mayo Clinic employee guidelines as a model you can adapt.
- **...But without employee training, guidelines are insufficient.** Strong guidelines poorly communicated and then enforced with a "gotcha" spirit do not contribute to a positive culture. Regular communication and training will help staff embrace social media opportunities with confidence.



These recommendations apply to all organizations, from critical access hospitals, to academic medical centers, to hospital systems. How each will apply these tools will and should vary according to strategic priorities and organizational needs. Social media should not be considered in isolation, but as part of the communications continuum, and also as one element of the marketing mix.

Following in our founders' footsteps, in 2010 Mayo Clinic created MCSMN as

an analog to The Surgeons Club for like-minded colleagues interested in applying social media to promote health, fight disease, and improve healthcare.

If Dr. Will Mayo would travel six weeks by train and steamship in 1924 to participate in a conference in New Zealand and visit surgeons in Australia, we have no doubt our founders also would have embraced these technologies that enable instantaneous communication.

You should too. ●

The Governance Institute thanks Lee Aase, Director, Mayo Clinic Social Media Network, for contributing this article. He can be reached at Aase.Lee@mayo.edu. The Mayo Clinic Social Media Network is a catalyst to accelerate safe and effective adoption of social media in clinical practice, education, and research. Access free resources, including guidelines and templates, at <https://socialmedia.mayoclinic.org>.