

The background is a solid yellow color. There are three stylized speech bubbles: a large green one at the top left, a smaller green one overlapping it at the top center, and a large orange one at the top right. A large green bird is positioned at the bottom, facing right. The bird has a white eye and simple black lines for legs.

Social Media and Your Cancer Program

BY KAT GERLICH

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE ON USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO MARKET YOUR CANCER PROGRAM OR PRACTICE

POSITIVE WORD OF MOUTH IS A POWERFUL MARKET INFLUENCER.

And today's digital platforms provide community cancer centers the opportunity to generate and nurture word of mouth exponentially, behooving practices to consider digital channels as part of their overall growth strategy. With careful planning, a minimum investment of time, and circumvention of potential pitfalls, community cancer centers and oncology practices can realize strong ROI (return on investment) in terms of increased patient pull-through by developing a social media presence.

Healthcare & the Internet

Searching for healthcare has become the third most popular use of the Internet, spawning the growth of virtual communities focused on topics from nutrition to cancer. Nearly 60 percent of all adults in the U.S. have looked online for health information, using search engines, the blogosphere, and social media.¹ Unpaid adult caregivers, friends, and/or family members are those most likely to look online for health information.¹ Women ages 35–54 in the role of unpaid caregiver comprise the largest segment using social media for health information.¹ Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are becoming trusted sources of information on a myriad of topics, including cancer care. In fact, patients and caregivers are increasingly relying on virtual sources to inform their healthcare decision-making process. See Figure 1, page 38, for type of medical information Internet users seek.

With those statistics in mind, ask yourself this question—*How does my cancer center or oncology practice use digital platforms to support informed patient decisions regarding*

cancer, cancer treatment, and choice of providers?

Today less than one-quarter of U.S. hospitals use social networking tools, and fewer still fully embrace digital media to connect and interact with their target audiences.^{2–4} If your cancer center or practice is included in this statistic, now is the time to develop a strong “virtual voice” that can help:

- Build your credibility as a recognized authority
- Support your differentiated brand
- Boost the number of patients who choose you as their provider.

Build a Foundation

To be successful, your digital voice must be built on a strong foundation that includes a written marketing plan, an in-depth Web presence, and improved patient processes.

Developing your marketing plan. A deep dive into marketing plan development is, of necessity, reserved for a separate discussion. In short, your marketing plan is an overview of your market landscape, detailing the strategies and programs you will employ to achieve the current year's goals. Objectives are built around your mission statement, which reflects what your cancer program or oncology practice *does*. Your marketing plan objectives are a summary of your target opportunities in terms of cancer incidences, disease sites, and/or specific patient populations. Relative to your area of specialization and competitive environment, your marketing plan should answer these questions:

- Who are your specific target population(s), and what are your growth goals relative to these groups?
- Why would (or should) your target population(s) choose you as their cancer care provider?

Your website is your “hub,” virtually representing your cancer program or practice 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

- What unique benefits does your cancer program offer?
- Which of your unique benefits are strong enough to stand as a differentiating platform?
- What promise(s) are implied to your patients and referring physicians within your differentiating statements, and how will you deliver on these promises?
- What marketing mix (traditional and/or digital) affords you the most productive communications with your target population(s)?

Next, you will need to develop a realistic step-by-step implementation timeline, secure any necessary training and tools, and delegate responsibilities for executing your marketing plan.

Optimizing your website. Your website is your “hub,” virtually representing your cancer program or practice 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Much of your digital strategy will ultimately drive traffic through this virtual doorway into your cancer center program. To achieve success, you must first:

- Identify your target audience(s)
- Conduct research to determine their needs
- Fill your website with as much content (relevant to identified audience needs) as you can.

That said, great content accomplishes nothing unless it is read by your target audience. Of the thousands of websites listed in response to online queries, you want yours to be among the first to appear so it is most likely to be visited via click-throughs. Optimize your website to elevate your search engine-results ranking for improved visibility by:


- Identifying 50 to 100 keyword phrases
- Establishing relevancy by organizing content around pages dedicated to two to three specific keyword phrases
- Having your webmaster incorporate your keywords into meta tags and alternative text
- Building authority via credible inbound links (i.e., links from an external webpage back to your website or webpage).

Improving your patient processes. Map out every touchpoint in your patient experience, and discuss how each member of your team can exceed expectations based on your brand differentiation. Ensure that your cancer center or oncology practice is sufficiently staffed. Further, staff should be aware of referral protocols and have access to resources that enable consistent communications for every encounter with patients, other staff, and referring physicians. Periodically, review your systems for optimal flow and maximum efficiency. Consistently delivering beyond the implied promise of your competitive differentiators will naturally generate positive word of mouth from your patients that can grow exponentially via virtual communities.

Phase 1: Explore Social Media Options

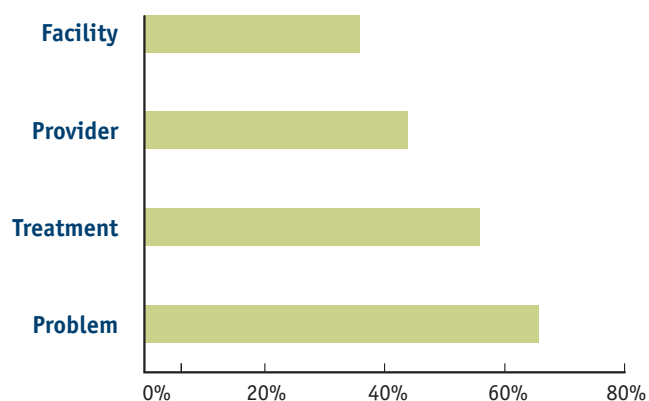
More than a tool, social media require strategic planning, consistent attention, and long-term commitment to reach goals. Simply put, social media done poorly can be far worse than refraining from the activity altogether. To achieve success, plan to dedicate at least one hour daily to your social media efforts. While you can choose from a plethora of social media platforms, consider Facebook, Twitter, and/or YouTube as good launching points. In fact, one survey indicates that about 94 percent of all Americans who rely on social networking for health information turn to Facebook.⁷

Each social media platform has its own style and protocols. Become acquainted with the platform and its users through exploration. Locate and subscribe to blogs and forums of interest. Find online communities and follow conversations based on topics or keywords in your area of specialization. Evaluate the quality of blogs and networks relevant to your cancer center or oncology practice and its services by observing the type of content or questions that stimulate interaction via posted responses and clickthroughs.


 Designate a staff member to create a profile at www.facebook.com. Click on “Pages” in the left-side navigation on the profile page, then the “Create a Page” button and select the type of page. Your cancer center or oncology practice can now begin to build an official Facebook Brand page. You may choose not to have default applications, such as Photos, Links, Events, Notes, and Video, show on your page. Working with a third-party application or your web designer, develop your custom page presentation to align with your overall brand messaging.

On Facebook, each page is separately indexed by search engines. Similar to your cancer center or oncology practice

Figure 1. Medical Information Sought by Internet Users¹




website, you will need to apply keyword optimization to content. Keep the tone informal for this social media venue. You might also consider installing an RSS feed, a content delivery application that syndicates relevant news or other types of web content specified by you. This allows you to continually maintain fresh content to support search relevancy and elevated rankings on search-engine results pages.

 Designate a staff member to sign up at www.twitter.com. Keep your “user name” brand relevant, i.e., the name of your cancer center or oncology practice.

After logging in, scan Trending Topics for relevance to your area of specialization. These topics-of-the-moment are being tweeted by thousands of users, all using the same term or hashtag (#). Look for cancer care hashtags to locate opportunities to make new connections and share information.

Create your cancer center or oncology practice Twitter bio, incorporating important keywords as appropriate to draw searchers. Upload your professional email contacts and follow those with whom you want to keep in touch, for example your referring physicians. After you “follow” your key professional contacts, click the “Following” link in your profile on your Twitter homepage. Some applications let you find people based on your indicated interests or specialties or keyword searches. Click the “Who-to-Follow” link at the top of the page to search for similar-interest users, clicking the “Follow” button next to additional people you want to track.

Run some searches via www.twitter.com or www.tweetdeck.com (a robust Twitter application) to check for mentions of your cancer center or oncology practice or other relevant keywords. “Follow” industry thought leaders or blogs—their messages will then automatically appear on your Twitter homepage incoming timeline, as will your messages to your “followers.” Limit the number of your “Follow” accounts to a manageable number. For most of us, 80 is a good ceiling number.

 Designate a staff member to sign up at www.youtube.com with his or her email address. Review videos submitted by cancer programs and other healthcare providers, as well as organizations and vendors within your area of specialization. You can start by going to www.accc-cancer.org and selecting “Find a Cancer Center.” ACCC-member programs are listed by state and have individual pages that link directly to their program websites. Look for social media icons on the program’s homepage.

Spend several weeks becoming acquainted with these three platforms, their users, and the type of information most sought after on each platform. Then begin indexing your content by topic and/or keywords. Include web pages, white papers, case studies, videos (if they are current), webinars, and so on—as much relevant content as your cancer center or oncology practice can gather.

Phase 2: Develop a Social Media Strategy

Unless you have defined, specific social media goals that align with your overall practice goals and have developed a clear plan for achieving these goals, you should not engage in on-line activity. Begin by answering these questions.

What are our social media goals? State what your cancer center or oncology practice is trying to achieve. Options might include:

- Raising community awareness to encourage cancer screenings
- Educating patients and their families on treatment options
- Facilitating patient referrals by clinicians
- Improving brand awareness
- Increasing patient traffic to your website
- Generating fundraising contributions
- Fostering clinical trial interest.

Who do we want to connect with? Profile your target population(s), age range, gender if applicable, and preferred blogs or social platforms. Based on your Phase 1 research, identify the information they seek and the type of content that draws them into discussions.

How can we best engage our audience and communicate the information they need?

Are we able to continue conversations over the long term?

If you cannot commit to regular monitoring, timely responses, and ongoing dialogue, your cancer center or oncology practice will not realize success in its social media efforts.

Map out your social media strategy for the year, choose your media platform(s), and assign realistic time frames. For example, if one goal is to achieve “X” number of “Likes” on your cancer program’s Facebook page, you will need to expand your contacts through your profile by posting a link to your Facebook page in staff emails, on your program’s website, blog, and Twitter site—everywhere you can. If you want to build relationships within your local community, you may include lighter, more general health and wellness content within a local context, as well as more in-depth, disease-specific posts and news. If you are targeting referring physicians, your staff can offer tremendous insights based on their daily practice interactions and frequently asked questions. More interaction requires more sharing. You may need to consider posting insightful comments or thought-provoking questions more than once a week.

Who will be charged with tactical implementation tasks? Schedule updates into staff calendars so your cancer center or oncology practice stays on course with its social media strategy. Assume the role of publisher (versus advertiser), gather as much meaningful content as you can, and plan posts out several months in advance—always assuming the

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE USING SOCIAL MEDIA?

Facebook

30 billion pieces of content—links, stories, blog posts, notes, and more—are shared on Facebook every month.⁵ By the end of 2011, there were more than 800 million active users, each of whom averages 130 Facebook Friends.⁵⁻⁷ The interactive nature of your Facebook business page enables relationship building through discourse with an expanding network, simultaneously educating an interested community, facilitating referrals, and potentially supporting increased search engine visibility.



Twitter

As of October 2011, about 25 million tweets are sent every day.⁷ Real-time dialoguing via succinct messages enables providers to stay informed on industry developments while growing a reputation as a thought leader. Networks of followers can increase visitors to your website or blog, while allowing you to monitor and respond immediately to what's being said about your providers, your cancer center or practice, your programs and services, or industry areas of specialization.



YouTube

About 2 billion videos are watched daily on YouTube.⁵ As the largest video sharing community in the world, YouTube enables you to engage and inspire an audience already highly interested in your area of specialization. Draw new patients to your cancer center or practice and build brand recognition and your reputation as a market leader—all while supporting search engine optimization through fresh content and inbound, optimized website links.



perspective of your target audience to keep the information you are sharing relevant to them.

Phase 3: Participate & Create in Social Media

Reciprocity fuels social media. Your cancer center or oncology practice will benefit by becoming a network contributor who brings value to your community members. Ask and answer questions. Help others. Continually share meaningful content to draw visitors to your website and build your brand. Here are more tips specific to the three social media sites discussed above.



Recommend any Facebook groups you like by clicking on the “Like” icon (a hand with thumb facing up). You may want to start with professional organizations such as:


- The Association of Community Cancer Centers (ACCC): www.facebook.com/accccancer
- The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO): www.facebook.com/ASCOcancer
- The Oncology Nursing Society (ONS): www.facebook.com/OncologyNursing
- The National Cancer Institute (NCI): www.facebook.com/cancer.gov
- The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN): www.facebook.com/National.Comprehensive.Cancer.Network

And patient and advocacy organizations such as:

- The American Cancer Society (ACS): www.facebook.com/AmericanCancerSociety
- The Susan G. Komen Foundation: www.facebook.com/susankomenforthecure
- The Lance Armstrong Foundation: www.facebook.com/pages/Lance-Armstrong-Foundation/108519699170201
- The Patient Advocacy Foundation: www.facebook.com/pages/Patient-Advocate-Foundation/121863874508285


Include the “Like” option on your program’s Facebook page, as well as your cancer center or oncology practice website, so visitors can recommend your program to their Facebook Friends. Add a Tweet button to encourage sharing.

Ask and answer questions, offering meaningful commentary and encouragement to raise awareness of cancer, cancer treatment, and cancer prevention. Use a warm, informal tone, as most users will not identify and engage with an overtly clinical or technical presence. Present ideas, accompanied by a call-to-action in the form of a keyword-rich link to one of your relevant YouTube videos, blog posts, a website landing page, white paper, case study, webinar, “Top 10” list, or other resources. Click on “Publish” to take it live. See page 43, for a look at what ACCC member programs are doing with social media.

 Since conversations drive Twitter, your best chance at success is to post meaningful content. Tweet about cancer care topics. Initiate dialogue through public messages sent to an individual. (For novices, this means posting your Tweet as “@username + your message”). The message will go to the individual, as well as all of his/her followers. Any of them may choose to retweet the message, which re-circulates the information to all of their followers as RT@username + original message. Retweets are the power of Twitter, spreading postings quickly to an extended audience. A user-relevant message of 100–120 characters leaves room for the message to be retweeted in its entirety.

When your cancer center or oncology program elects to follow individuals or groups, their tweets and retweets appear on your Twitter homepage incoming timeline. As you develop followers, they will likewise see your messages. The more followers you develop, the more extensive your communications reach. You can also send private, direct messages (DMs) as “d username + your message” to followers.

Twitter posts are limited to a maximum of 140 characters—characters that exceed this threshold will be dropped from the message. An intriguing headline in combination with rich media (links to content-rich landing pages, videos on your YouTube channel, or a request form) can be a highly effective call to action that moves respondents further along the process. Provide value to build credibility.

 Search YouTube by keyword to find channels within your area of specialization. Subscribe to those channels your cancer center or oncology practice finds most relevant. Rate some videos. If your cancer center or oncology practice has video tools that are current, post them. For example, go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gY7F9BsrUnQ&feature=channel_video_title to see how ACCC used a video to promote membership benefits.

When you choose a “favorite,” it will display on your channel. Share your channel video by becoming a Video Friend of a channel or an individual user.

Start to develop ideas for videos about your cancer center or oncology practice, such as:


- Topic-relevant testimonials or patient stories (obtain patient’s written permission)
- Brief introductions to unique programs or services
- Informal physician profiles, approaches, or perspectives
- Specific treatment information
- Survivorship support
- Community outreach efforts.

In general, videos longer than three minutes run the risk of losing their audience. Consider segmenting longer videos into shorter clips. Shorter, emotionally compelling videos are far

more likely to be shared and discussed. If your current videos are outdated, remove and update with more current presentations that are relevant to the target audience needs revealed by your research. You may wish to check out Freemake Video Converter (www.freemake.com), video conversion and editing software that allows direct uploads to YouTube and Facebook.

Phase 4: Launch & Expand Your Social Media


Make it easy for patients and their families to spread the word about your cancer center or oncology practice. Once you establish social media channels, promote them everywhere you can, and encourage patient participation.

 Once you hit “Publish” your Facebook website is live. “Like” your site and ask your staff to do the same. This will display on your Profile wall (aggregated content display) and will enhance your Page visibility. As Fans engage with your content, their activity is communicated to all of their Facebook Friends through their news feed, which increases your reach.

Invite all of your patient base, as well as professional contacts to participate and become Facebook Fans. Provide them with a link to make it easy for them. There are no limits imposed, so encourage your network connections to “Like” and share your Page. Provide links to your Page whenever possible, including email signatures, website, blog postings, and other practice communications. Add fresh content at least once per week, always including a call to action such as those mentioned previously.

Connect with other professional and professional organizations, such as:

- ACCC: www.facebook.com/accccancer
- ASCO: www.facebook.com/ASCOcancer
- ONS: www.facebook.com/OncologyNursing
- Association of Oncology Social Workers (AOSW): www.facebook.com/AssociationofOncologySW.
- American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO): www.facebook.com/pages/American-Society-for-Radiation-Oncology/35768312349
- Association of Cancer Executives (ACE): www.facebook.com/pages/Association-of-Cancer-Executives/227211637332936?sk=info.

 Post relevant content to your organization’s Twitter page at least a few times weekly to foster deeper engagement and to advance your communications and publicity goals. Contribute meaningful ideas, ask questions, suggest additional resources, and encourage sharing via links and retweets. Over time, you should notice an increase in the questions directed to your program, as you build your reputation as a thought leader.



Launch videos on your cancer center or oncology practice YouTube channel. As you post videos, promote and cross-promote across all of your market outreach, particularly social avenues, such as your Twitter stream. Link to it from your website, and incorporate it into your Facebook account. Subscriptions trigger automatic notifications whenever you upload new material, so encouraging viewers to subscribe encourages sharing and additional visits.

Phase 5: Monitor & Expand Your Social Media

Continue to monitor across platforms to keep your finger on the pulse of your audience and assess your effectiveness, and always keep building your network connections. The rule of thumb: listen 90 percent of the time and spend the remaining 10 percent of your networking time contributing and building connections. Publish everything your cancer center or oncology practice has, anywhere you can. Monitor. Ask. Answer. Invite. Share. When forming responses, keep in mind that defensiveness or overt self-promotion can quickly damage your online reputation. If you encounter positive feedback, thank the individual responsible. If you share someone else's material, credit the originator.

Free monitoring tools are available online at:

- www.google.com/alerts
- www.socialmention.com/alerts
- www.tweetdeck.com
- www.facebook.com
- www.youtube.com

Phase 6: Measure & Adjust Your Social Media Efforts

Listen to questions and comments to hone continually your understanding of what users are looking for. Measure, analyze, assess, and adapt as needed, but do not abandon your social media plan. Successful social media take time, so your cancer center or oncology practice must be willing to invest the time. At a minimum, track your social media on a monthly basis. Key metrics include:

- Website visitors
- Facebook Fans (People who “Like” your cancer center or oncology practice) and activity (the number of “Likes” and comments per post)
- Twitter activity
- YouTube video views
- Inbound links
- Subscribers
- Patients generated from social media outlets.

Facebook provides a built-in analytics program called Insights, which can be used to track your Fan-base growth and engagement, page views, wall posts, discussion threads,

fan demographics, feedback, and more. If, for example, your cancer center or oncology practice observes spikes or drops in engagement around a particular post, these changes are an indicator for making adjustments in your content strategy and editorial calendar to increase or decrease the number of posts around a given topic. To use this program, click on “View Insights” in your Page’s left-side navigation. Watch for spikes in Fan growth and try to identify growth initiators. Monthly growth of 10 to 13 percent is likely the highest your cancer center or oncology practice can achieve organically, or naturally.

You may also be interested in using Grader (www.grader.com), a robust suite of tools that measure and analyze online marketing efforts, such as Facebook, Twitter, press releases, blog posts, and your website.

Virtual Discourse & Risk Mitigation

Given the daunting topic of cancer and the increasing expansion of social network participation, digital media offer cancer centers and oncology practices a means by which to develop and maintain relationships with patients and referring providers to an extent previously unattainable. Enabling virtual conversations, social media channels facilitate give-and-take communications that embody trust and honesty from a patient-centered perspective.

Yet, the use of social media is not without challenges. While the permanence of virtual communications may legitimately underscore exposure concerns, such as potential negative publicity, and regulatory and privacy risks, cancer centers and oncology practices can mitigate risks through creative planning. Protect your program by:


- Developing written social media use guidelines for all individuals connected with your organization. Consider coupling these guidelines with discussion and training. Examples you may wish to review include guidelines by Vanderbilt Medical Center (www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/root/vumc.php?site=socialmediatoolkit) and the Mayo Clinic (<http://sharing.mayoclinic.org/guidelines/for-mayo-clinic-employees/>).
- Creating a pre-determined plan and a professional contact who can help your cancer center or oncology practice navigate a negative situation in the event one should arise.
- Mapping out potential discussion topics in advance, and only posting content that has been preapproved by an internal review board. One easy solution may be to draw from your Frequently Asked Questions, website content, or blog posts.
- Ensuring that your cancer center or oncology practice does not use social media to “practice medicine.” Bottom line: avoid giving individual medical advice online.
- Protecting the identity of your program and your staff. For

ACCC MEMBER PROGRAMS & SOCIAL MEDIA

example, do not include employee ID numbers, which are often the individual's Social Security number.

- Avoiding blatant self-promotion. Keep posts conversational, bypassing aggressive marketing or constant self-focused commentary. Remember, with social media, it's about *the audience*.
- Maintaining realistic expectations. Start slowly and give it time.

Open Your Virtual Doors

Digital media offer unprecedented access to patients and clinicians who are actively participating in conversations about their specialization. With careful planning, cancer centers and oncology practices can embrace new opportunities to expand the breadth and depth of their market penetration. Those organizations that fail to adopt virtual strategies may find themselves trying to catch up to their competitors. Those organizations who join in the discussion to share knowledge and expert opinions online can help large groups of individuals obtain the accurate information necessary to informed decisions—even as they build their center brand, facilitate customer service, and drive positive public relations. 

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- “Safe Handling Dance” by Presbyterian Cancer Center in Charlotte, N.C. www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvNeJSLzpgo. More than 5,000 hits.
- @JoplinMercy. <https://twitter.com/#!/JoplinMercy>. Tweets about St. John’s Regional Cancer Center, Joplin, Mo., an ACCC member program that was destroyed by a tornado in May 2011. You can read about rebuild efforts, including time-lapse videos of the hospital construction.
- “CU Cancer Center Experts Say Vaccinating Boys Against HPV is a ‘No-brainer.’” A blog post on the Colorado University Cancer Center’s, “Target: Cancer,” at: www.coloradocancerblogs.org/category/target-cancer.
- “Latinas Fuertes Y Saludables” (Latinas: Strong and Healthy). In Christiana Care’s program, 18 promotoras—promoters of health education—come together at an event to share their message with other Latinas in Delaware’s rapidly growing Hispanic population. The promotoras are volunteers trained in breast care outreach at Christiana Care’s Helen F. Graham Cancer Center, Wilmington, Del. See photos taken at the event on Christiana Care’s Flickr page at: www.flickr.com/photos/christianacare.

