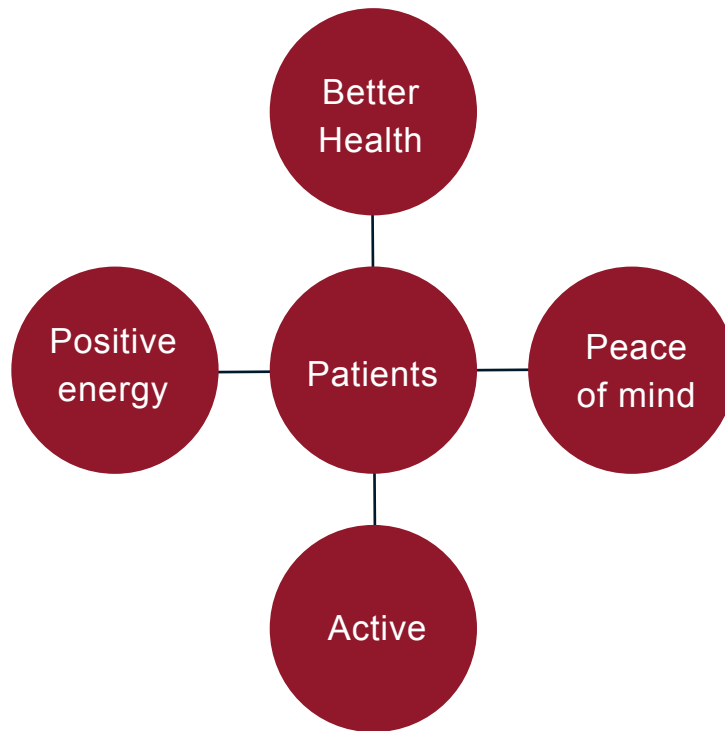




Power of **Online Health** Communities

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Abstract

Today, more than ever before, people are actively engaged in their health, health care and in the management of complex health data. This active involvement, fueled by reliable information, often helps patients to more effectively manage their care and improve their quality of life and health outcomes. Patients engagement is best supported when information needed to make health decisions is available at the point of need—at home, at work or when consulting with health professionals. This paper outlines the power of online health communities and how hospitals can benefit out of this new phenomenon in the healthcare industry.

Introduction

Online communities enable people to create content online. Such user-generated content takes the form of photo-sharing, video-uploading, music-downloading and personal blogging etc. The technologies, called social media, that people use in their daily lives for entertainment, education and financial management is now becoming a platform to use for health information and support. Social media on the Internet are empowering, engaging, and educating consumers and providers in health care. They promote collaboration between patients, their caregivers, medical professionals and other stakeholders in health.

Applications

Using online health communities, people with chronic health conditions are sharing their stories with each other, not just for emotional support, but for the clinical knowledge they gain from participating with other patients in an online community. Doctors are meeting up online to share knowledge about challenging cases and solutions that work. Researchers are coming together with patients to learn about side effects in real-time. Online health communities has infinitely expanded the possibilities beyond the constraints of in-person, localized contacts. Users or patients are linked into networks based on shared interests. They are available 24/7 that facilitates real-time and asynchronous communication. These communities are usually designed to mirror an organization's brand or Web site and offer a rich set of tools for the patients as well as the physicians.

Features: Some of the common features in an online health community include the following:

- **Personal and Group blogs:** Patients and physicians get an online voice to express themselves and add richness to your community.
- **Bulletin Boards / Forums:** Let patients support each other by providing a place for answers to common questions on a wide variety of health topics.
- **Groups:** Patients can easily create, categorize and lead workgroups or interest groups, and communicate and collaborate using group email lists, resource libraries, and wiki notepads.
- **Calendar:** Patients as well as physicians can maintain personal calendars to keep track of their schedules.
- **Library & Photos:** Shared libraries provide a space to upload and easily find and download files, links, health success/failure stories, etc.
- **Chat & Instant Message:** Patients and physicians can have spontaneous or scheduled live conversations. Virtual chat rooms allow a regular place to meet for rapid decision-making.
- **Podcasts** help people create and share audio files.
- **Really Simple Syndication (RSS)** rapidly disseminates new information, especially for researchers in the medical field.
- **Videos:** Store, share and organize health related videos.
- **Integrated search:** Search for information within and outside of the community portal.

Benefits

Online health communities help hospitals to build their brand awareness through open communication with patients and clinicians. They help to obtain direct and immediate feedback on services and create a greater bond between the patients and their doctors. Hospitals can also use this as a means to deliver information and services to patients, physicians and insurance companies. They offer a venue where physicians and medical researchers can interact, share best practices and create original content. These communities extend the service reach for hospitals and position them better with a competitive edge.

Measuring a clear return-on-investment for organizations such as health plans and hospitals that adopt social media in health often is not straightforward. Will it immediately generate new sales? Probably not. However, social media can benefit the company over the long term in a number of ways: integrating patient care and enabling continuity, enhancing patients' compliance with therapies, building goodwill in communities, providing useful health information to people who opt-in to receive it, and averting costs that would be incurred in more acute settings. Where groups of people come together to aggregate opinions and data, there will be a valuable data stream collected. The value of these data can be monetized in a variety of ways. The data can be used for clinical trials and new product development by life sciences and medical device companies.

People who choose to use social media for managing health are finding a growing number of applications and tools, especially mobile tools. Many social media projects are already focusing on disease management and other specialty areas. Many sites are already oriented towards improving the health and offer outcomes information. Consumer driven healthcare will become a catalyst for these online health communities and will inspire innovation in applications and tools that will integrate health information, help adopt healthy lifestyles and eventually improve population health.

Summary

For online health communities to realize their potential to help people lead healthy lives and become engaged participants in their care, they must evolve in ways that maximize opportunities for innovation in meeting the varied needs of a population that has increasingly diverse health needs and goals.

About the author:

Anand Gaddum, MHA is the Director of Healthcare Practice at iLink Systems, Inc. He has broad healthcare domain knowledge with special emphasis on claims and has implemented a number of change initiatives for healthcare organizations. He has a proven track record in a variety of fields, which include medical instruments, software development, training and change management.

About iLink Systems:

iLink Systems is a custom software solutions provider and Microsoft Certified Gold Partner. Our solution capabilities include enterprise application development, optimization and integration; web application development; user experience architecture; and mobility application development and services. Our vertical industry experience includes: healthcare, government, technology, telecom, and nonprofit. iLink has worked with companies and organizations at all levels of business maturity, from startups to the Fortune 50. Our accomplishments also include numerous rapid application prototype development and complex solution migrations from one technology framework to another.

Headquartered in Bellevue, Washington, iLink has offices in Washington, D.C., Atlanta, GA, and Chennai, India. With over 120 employees and growing, iLink has been providing business solutions for over six years. Members of our team have numerous certifications in a variety of technology and solution frameworks, particularly on the Microsoft platform.

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