

Smart Strategies for Maintaining Professionalism in Social Media

When considering a move to social media marketing, it is important to create a strategy for how to engage with your audience. Medical providers are bound by HIPAA guidelines to protect both the patient and the practice. A move to social media does not mean medical providers put themselves at greater risk of HIPAA violations. However, it is important that all staff members who engage in the practices social media network conduct themselves in a professional manner.

Social media is becoming an attractive [medical marketing](#) strategy for more and more healthcare practices every day. The appeal of connecting with the community via a very affordable and easy-to-use platform makes it an ideal choice, but it often prompts a common question: how do you maintain business and privacy standards in such an open environment? In this realm of friends and followers, it is easy for healthcare providers to blur the lines between business and pleasure by becoming engrossed in status updates and conversational comments. When beginning to plan a social media marketing strategy, physicians must first and foremost determine where to draw the discretionary line between professionalism and personal life.

In this day and age, being social is all about sharing personal details, but as a medical provider, you are always bound by HIPAA guidelines. This is perhaps something apprehensive that lingers in the back of the mind, but it doesn't have to keep you from making your social media launch a success. It means you must be smart about handling personal information.

Your existence in social media can take many forms, whether it be a website, a forum, a blog, a Facebook page, or much more. Wherever you exist in the social media realm, post an easy-to-read disclosure statement before you begin. Remind patients to use caution, because any piece of information on the Internet is available to the eyes of anyone in the world for an indefinite period of time. Remember that patients are not [covered entities](#) under HIPAA regulations. It is fine to encourage the sharing of stories on your website, but revealing personal information is always the patient's choice and never yours.

You have little control over what sort of information a patient chooses to share, but you have unlimited control over your response. If a patient posts a comment on your website stating something such as, "Thank you for seeing me at such short notice," or "I really love the blepharoplasty I had done at your office, Dr. James," what do you say? You must be careful not to violate HIPAA regulations by publicly acknowledging that you have a relationship with the patient. An appropriate choice of response might be "Thank you for sharing" or "Thank you for the information." If patient comments are posted somewhere other than an open forum – such as a newsletter or website testimonial section – have the patient sign a release. Getting consent in writing will ensure that you are HIPAA compliant and will increase patient satisfaction because it demonstrates your commitment to their privacy.

It is easy to fall into the trap of treating your business site like your personal site, but just like the "real world," there is a distinct difference. Notice that on Facebook, a person creates a personal page on which he or she has "friends,"

while a business creates a separate page on which it has “fans.” This distinction is especially important for physicians, since “friending” patients on a personal Facebook site can have ethical implications and risks violating HIPAA standards. Becoming “friends” with someone on Facebook often gives a person access to a wealth of personal information that would otherwise remain private, and for healthcare providers, having access to that knowledge is unnecessary.

Just as you must use discretion when handling patient information, you must always consider how each piece of shared information represents your business. Your presence in the social media world is as much a part of your reputation as your presence in life. Facebook and Twitter users post more than 50 million status updates each day, and Facebook users post more than 5 billion pieces of content each month. You might have photographs or weblinks of your own that you are excited to share, but use discretion. Is it appropriate to post pictures of an employee’s birthday party held at your office? Is it appropriate to post pictures of an employee’s birthday party held at someone’s home or other venue, such as a restaurant or bar? Tastes may vary. It is best to err on the side of caution.

Growing your practice via [social media marketing](#) will be a learning experience for both you and your patients. A little apprehension is to be expected, but do not let the shadow of privacy law or business etiquette prevent you from adapting your healthcare marketing strategy to something new and different. Maintaining professionalism in your online content does not mean you have to reinvent the way you do business. Smart strategies involve sound practical judgment and can be invaluable to your patients and your practice.

If you would like to implement social media marketing into your practice and need help, give us a call at (888) 324-5559 or [email](#) today.