

# Use of Social Media in Human Healthcare and Its Application to Veterinary Medicine

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## Introduction

When asked what would make them abandon social media, each of the three human hospitals responded without hesitation, “Nothing.”

Social media permeate our homepages, online shopping sites, and our health care. While some are balking at the change and the openness of online information, others are embracing this evolution of word-of-mouth marketing and leading the way.

Ed Bennett, an expert on social media in health care, maintains a list of which human hospitals are maintaining what social media sites. Twitter and Facebook are currently battling it out for the most hospital sites,<sup>1</sup> although Facebook currently has about 300 million more users.<sup>2,3</sup> Regardless, when there are hundreds of millions of people retrieving information from these sites on a regular basis, it stands to reason that a good number of veterinary clients are behaving similarly, especially because, as one survey suggests, pet owners are more likely to use such technology than non-owners.<sup>4</sup>

When veterinary consumers want information about their pet’s health, or the hospital that keeps their pet healthy, the preponderance of evidence suggests that it should not only be there for them but that it should also exist across multiple media. The human health care industry has already come to the realization that social media are an excellent platform to provide 24-hour access to in-depth information on the hospital, the services provided, current news, and specific health concerns. To explore how hospitals are managing their social media existence, communication managers in three major human hospitals, and one veterinary hospital were interviewed on their policies and plans for the largest networks. The intended result is to provide veterinary practices with a primer to maintaining a presence on social media, from policies to “tweeting,” or even just understanding the benefits of blogging.

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<sup>1</sup> “Found In Cache — Social Media resources for health care professionals from Ed Bennett”, n.d., <http://ebennett.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Costolo: Twitter Now Has 190 Million Users Tweeting 65 Million Times A Day”, n.d., <http://techcrunch.com/2010/06/08/twitter-190-million-users/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Statistics | Facebook”, n.d., <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>.

<sup>4</sup> “DVMs warming up to technology - DVM”, n.d., <http://veterinarynews.dvm360.com/dvm/ArticleStandard/Article/detail/653159>.

## **Methods**

Telephone interviews were conducted from June through July 2010 with the social media manager, or equivalent person or team, for Cleveland Clinic; a regional hospital wishing to remain anonymous; and VCA Animal Hospitals. Lee Aase, Director of the Mayo Clinic Center for Social Media, was interviewed in person at Mayo Clinic to allow for a more in-depth conversation on Mayo's social media practices. The hospitals studied were chosen for their presence on more than one social media network and their willingness to discuss their activities on the sites. To ensure an appropriate working knowledge of the main social media networking sites, the author enrolled online in Social Media University Global; an open collection of coursework whose chancellor also happens to be Lee Aase. Enrollment is highly recommended for readers who plan to pioneer a program for their practice.<sup>5</sup> A literature review was conducted on the benefits of using social media as a marketing concept, as well as the ways they are being used in medical centers.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Recommendation #1: Two policies are better than one**

Because of the pervasiveness of social media networks in society, it is important to realize the distinction of three issues associated with their use: marketing practices, internal policy development, and the area where these two merge. Essentially, employees take their jobs to be a major part of their life, especially in the animal care industry. Often, what happens at work will surface on personal social networks online. Therefore, it is crucial that any entity wishing to control what is said about them online by employees has both an internal policy for marketing purposes and a policy for employees to follow on their own time concerning their place of employment. Sound policies have already been put into practice by other companies, and are available on the Social Media Governance website in a database form.<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing which aspect of employee social media policy is being discussed is an important distinction. Ultimately two completely different social media policy documents should be created – one for staff on their personal time providing boundaries and guidelines on their representation of a practice, and another for those participating in the practice-managed social media sites.

**Policy for Personal Social Media Use:** Chris Boudreaux of SocialMediaGovernance.com makes a few best practice suggestions for such policies in his summary report, "Analysis of Social Media Policies: Lessons and

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<sup>5</sup> Lee Aase, "SMUG Social Media University Global", n.d., <http://social-media-university-global.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Online Database of Social Media Policies", n.d., <http://socialmediagovernance.com/policies.php>.

Best Practices.” First, be clear about company boundaries online – for example, whether staff can use logos or trademarks in their personal content.<sup>7</sup> Ideally this information should be easy to access, which likely means posting it online as that is where the employees are when they need to reference it. Also, when employees are on their personal sites, they need to be transparent about their association with the practice. Usually this includes a statement similar to: “While I work for Animal Hospital X, the opinions expressed here are solely my own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the ownership or employees of Animal Hospital X or its clients.” Providing an exact statement to employees helps ensure that it is reproduced in their online sites.

**Policy for the Practice’s Sites:** Often, policies for consumer-posted comments on company-hosted weblogs and Facebook or Twitter pages can be very similar. The namesake organization represented by the page typically reserves the right to remove any negative or off-topic language from the site; Mayo Clinic’s policy for their “Sharing Mayo Clinic” blog explains this in a very user-friendly way:

We review comments before they’re posted, and those that are off-topic or clearly promoting a commercial product generally won’t make the cut. We also expect a basic level of civility; disagreements are fine, but mutual respect is a must, and profanity or abusive language are out-of-bounds.<sup>8</sup>

Further down the Mayo page, this statement is reiterated and further explained in legal terms, but a plain English approach is an excellent starting place for comments policies, whether it is a personal blog or a hosted Facebook page. This language is very similar to the approach taken by the other hospitals that were interviewed. Conversation is welcomed, but can be removed if it becomes too negative or off-topic based on the opinion of the site administrator.<sup>9,10,11</sup>

One notable exception that requires careful planning of policy statements are those that would be written for some state or federally funded institutions. By law, some such entities are very restricted in how they can use social media and if they do, how it can be managed.<sup>12</sup>

## **Recommendation #2: Set Goals for Social Media**

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<sup>7</sup> Chris Boudreaux, *Analysis of Social Media Policies: Lessons and Best Practices*, December 16, 2009, <http://socialmediagovernance.com/downloads/download-social-media-policy-study.shtml>.

<sup>8</sup> Mayo Clinic, “Blog Comment Policy”, n.d., <http://www.mayoclinic.org/blogs/comment.html>.

<sup>9</sup> J. Schaedler, July 27, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> K. Wells, July 21, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Zeigler, June 2, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Charlie Powell, September 15, 2010.

With a basic plan, guidelines and policies in place, goals must be set for a given program. Specifically, since social media is nothing more than a host of additional communication tools, one must determine what the expected outcome is for the effort. This is an extremely important step when initiating any communication in business and is frequently overlooked or dismissed resulting in poor cost effectiveness. Also, when considering outcomes, the time element must be factored in – what results do you want immediately, in a year from now, and in the long-term future?

Goal setting begins with identifying any problems to solve in business practices. Jonathan Richman in his, *Dose of Digital*, blog suggests applying creativity and innovation from social media to individual solutions. He warns, however, that one should not start with the constraint of a single specific platform and try to ask how to use it. That is, don't start by saying how can Facebook be used to further my veterinary practice? Instead, determine what is to be accomplished and then determine which platforms will help. Maybe Twitter or YouTube would better accomplish a task than Facebook? This paper provides guidance for some of the basic advantages of these different web tools, bearing in mind one can always use them differently than intended, and the goal is not to “check off as many social media platforms as possible.”<sup>13</sup>

Three primary goals emerged from interviews with VCA and the three human hospitals<sup>14,15,16,17</sup>:

**Goal 1: Control the Message.** While one cannot completely control social media, one can provide a central platform for clients to congregate and discuss a practice or group. Although social media and the brief span of readership interest inherently limit the practice owner's voice in the message portrayed, creating a space for this conversation allows one to better monitor what is being said and be more immediately involved with potential issues or crises.

**Goal 2: Improve Customer Service.** Superior customer service is most simply achieved through consumers using the inherent 24-hour posting abilities of Facebook and Twitter, for example. The process is similar to sending email, yet is a more publicly accessible statement by the consumer. This should benefit the practice by increasing the consumer's chances of getting a more immediate and personal reply from the practice as well as others who may have had a similar experience.

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Richman, “4 Mistakes You Make By Playing Not to Lose in Social Media | Dose of Digital,” *Dose of Digital*, 2010, <http://www.doseofdigital.com/2010/08/4-mistakes-made-playing-not-lose-social-media/>.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Aase, July 30, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> J. Schaedler, interview.

<sup>16</sup> K. Wells, interview.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Zeigler, interview.

**Goal 3: Involve the Community** The community surrounding a practice most likely begins with the clientele and due to the nature of social media has the potential to expand exponentially. Aase suggested using such tools as an arena for the patient/client to get to know the doctor before the appointment. Aase also suggested that having doctors post a blurb about themselves on the site, or better yet, uploading a short video of them introducing themselves to YouTube could be very valuable.<sup>22</sup> For many, the client will be more comfortable to speak frankly with the doctor about matters as personal and important as healthcare of themselves or their animals. Reducing, but not eliminating, much of the first meeting awkwardness can allow for more time within the appointment to discuss health concerns and patient/client education. Community involvement includes a broad range of topics, like introducing your practice, as well as several goals laid out by Tamar Weinberg in her book, *The New Community Rules: Marketing on the Social Web*,<sup>23</sup> of which, the following are most relevant to veterinary medicine:

- Increased brand awareness,
- Reputation management,
- Increased sales, and, perhaps most importantly,
- Becoming an information source.

Increased brand awareness seems to have passively been a goal for the three human hospitals and one veterinary hospital interviewed for this paper. All viewed social media as a widely used medium by their clients, and wanted to have a presence there, thus almost certainly increasing their brand awareness by virtue of not getting out-publicized by competitors.

The teams and individuals interviewed are all focusing some energy on reputation management to try and maintain a level of control over the plethora of references to each of their respective companies and employees. For this, social media provides user controlled platforms which generate increased positive, truthful information to manage reputation unlike many questionable consumer rating sites found in a common Internet search.

Increased sales can be driven by positive reviews on practice-generated sites, or on sites like *Yelp* or *Angie's List*. The capabilities of today's Internet provide unlimited opportunities for consumers to communicate experiences with a certain product or service. This has in turn spawned an unmatched ability to research future purchases and to be influenced by peer reviews, which may be directed towards veterinary and health services. In fact, as Tamar Weinberg points out, a 2008 study by the Society for New Communications research showed that 75

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<sup>22</sup> Aase, interview.

<sup>23</sup> Tamar Weinberg, *The New Community Rules: Marketing on the Social Web* (O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2009), 27.

percent of participants made product and service purchases based on peer recommendations.<sup>24</sup>

Being an informational resource is not the same as making a sales presentation. Potential and current clients will likely not return to a practice's social media sites to endure what they perceive is a sales pitch. Clients will, however, return if they are given access to valuable information and if the source becomes a go-to resource for their pet's health or well-being. For example, the single most accessed web page on the Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine website is the one featuring lay representations of small animal anatomy.<sup>25</sup> A typical mistake made by a practice is to take on the entire subject of veterinary medicine only to be eclipsed by commercial websites. The easiest way to begin is to pick a single topic a practice and its staff is very familiar with, and create a conversation about it. For example, phrase it in the form of a question: "What do I do when my dog has diarrhea?" Listen to the responses received from visitors' comments, and then respond. Weinberg suggests that these responses will "reinforce the relationship with your audience and let it know that you value its insights."<sup>26</sup> And if the conversation wanders away from an area of expertise or comfort, one should feel free to stick to responding to what they are comfortable with, refer to proper resources, and ignore everything else.

Goals must not only be realistic, but also attainable for the practitioner and practice.

### **Recommendation #3: Determine Content Base**

Companies that were interviewed varied on where the content for their postings originated, ranging from simply reposting or linking to stories that were already published for another media source,<sup>27</sup> to creating much of the content on their own specifically for their social media site,<sup>28</sup> and anywhere in between.

**Content: Patient Generated Success Stories.** Human healthcare is constrained by Department of Health and Human Services' HIPAA guidelines and must gain written patient permission before publishing any potentially revealing information.<sup>29</sup> This is an excellent standard for veterinarians to follow as well. Sometimes the fear of accidentally releasing personal information or maybe just the process of trying to gain permission for release of specifics on a case prevent organizations from discussing important information. Aase contends, it is worth the minimal trouble of asking the client to sign a consent form to end up with

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<sup>24</sup> Weinberg, *The New Community Rules*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Charlie Powell, interview.

<sup>26</sup> Weinberg, *The New Community Rules*, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Zeigler, interview.

<sup>28</sup> Aase, interview.

<sup>29</sup> "Summary of the HIPAA Privacy Rule", n.d.,

<http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/hipaa/understanding/summary/index.html>.

excellent content.<sup>30</sup> Having cases or patient stories provides not only a testimonial to the care an organization provides, but more importantly acts as a form of support and information for clients and non-clients who are going through a similar situation or who are making the initial purchase decision referenced above.

**Content: Community and Emergency Services.** Using social media sites as clearinghouses for emergency information can be very valuable and build significant public trust. Furthermore, their use is predicted to rise significantly in disaster and emergency communication driven by citizen demand. By design, such sites allow one to easily and quickly update with text, photos, and video content. Cleveland Clinic will cross-post infectious disease information across all their channels when necessary, such as with the H1N1 outbreak.<sup>31</sup> In a veterinary setting, for example, social media could be used to coordinate animal care for families that have been forced from their homes due to natural disasters, or provide information on an animal illness that has become locally important. Because social media is increasingly pushed to mobile devices, this can get information out more efficiently than just a posting on a practice website. As of the summer of 2010, 47 percent of Americans with mobile devices are browsing social networks on their phones,<sup>32</sup> this number will likely continue to increase and posting one message to a Facebook page is much simpler and less intrusive than a text with the same message to all your clients – and is still likely to reach a wide audience.

#### **Recommendation #4: Don't get caught up in ROI**

Return on investment (ROI) is essential to business management and marketing. The advent and adoption of social media requires a reexamination of ROI. None of the hospitals interviewed were actively measuring ROI, perhaps because, as Jason Falls of Social Media Explorer states, “You are trying to put numeric quantities around human interactions and conversations, which are not quantifiable.”<sup>33</sup> There are metrics trying to quantify the amount of money made through each click, each posting, and each conversation. However, consider the initial goals for entering the world of social media; do they include being a part of the conversation allowing for a better opportunity to communicate with your clients? Being actively involved in social media should allow for these accomplishments, and again as Falls explains, “Your ROI is what you got out of the conversation, not what you got out of their checkbook.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lee Aase, interview.

<sup>31</sup> Kevin Zeigler, interview.

<sup>32</sup> “RF Intent Index Mobile”, n.d., <http://www.intentindex.com/mobile/>.

<sup>33</sup> Jason Falls, “What Is The ROI For Social Media?,” *social media explorer*, n.d., <http://www.socialmediaexplorer.com/2008/10/28/what-is-the-roi-for-social-media/>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Another approach, described by Aase, is to recognize that as the investment hovers near zero, the ROI approaches infinity.<sup>35</sup> An important advantage of social media is that they are free, or relatively low cost, especially when considered over time. Accordingly, the only other investment is human resource time; however, this is time that is being spent on customer service, practice building, and becoming an essential resource to the community. These are all activities that can increase a practice's presence in the conversation, increasing a range of return for a minimal investment.

## Recommendation #5: Sign up.

### Facebook

The most popular social media site currently is Facebook, and it is therefore an obvious choice for beginning a social media effort. Practices should really build a social media program around goals and determine which sites can best help achieve them. Initially, however, if one wants to generate a social media presence with minimal effort, Facebook is the right move.

There are many other reasons to consider using Facebook in your practice: it is a widely used site, it's completely free, and the format is all there, all that's needed is to add specific information. A professional practice Facebook page is similar to a personal Facebook profile but with additional features like News Feed stories and Events.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 1: Mayo Clinic Facebook Page

This provides clients with a central location for information on the practice. The Facebook page will need to be accessed through a personal profile account, but

<sup>35</sup> Lee Aase, interview.

<sup>36</sup> "Help Center | Facebook", n.d., <http://www.facebook.com/help/?page=175>.

once created, one can add other administrators, such as staffers, who can also manage a page through their personal account. Visitors to the page will not have any access to personal account information; it is simply a way for multiple users to manage the same business page. For example, if a practitioner and office manager are the admins on a Facebook page for Animal Hospital X, if either posts an update it appears as a post made by Animal Hospital X, not anyone personally.

VCA Animal Hospitals maintain two separate pages for their corporation. One is directed toward veterinarians and students, and the other is a resource for clients.<sup>37</sup> While the VCA Facebook page has only been active since May 2010, it has proven itself an excellent medium for directly responding to clients, as well as a recruitment tool for veterinarians seeking employment.<sup>38</sup>

### **Twitter**

Twitter is a microblogging site that is constantly evolving into a stronger social media tool. Much of that power is coming from how people are choosing to use it. Many people don't use Twitter because they perceive it as trivial and don't care about the little happenings in individual's lives. That perception and behavior is based on a rudimentary understanding of its capabilities. Twitter messages, called Tweets, are limited to 140 characters. While a statement can be made, it can also prompt one to link back to a blog or Facebook page for clients to get the rest of the information. Blog posts or status updates go directly to the consumer instead of the consumer having to navigate by chance to a more cumbersome website for information.

Facebook and Twitter (and of course YouTube) make it easy to upload or link to photos and videos. Audiovisual media are extremely beneficial and will allow clients to feel more connected to the practice if they can upload photos of their animals as well.

When tweeting, recommendations should try to remain consistent and relevant, in order to gain recognition as an industry leader for the veterinary profession.<sup>39</sup>

Based on a cursory search of veterinary practices utilizing Twitter, it is not currently utilized as much as Facebook, opening an opportunity for practices to capitalize on the site.

### **Conclusion**

Social media have been around since humans could speak<sup>40</sup> with the difference now being that the medium choices have expanded allowing delivery to unmet

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<sup>37</sup> J. Schaedler, interview.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Tamar Weinberg, *The New Community Rules*, 137.

<sup>40</sup> "35 Social Media Theses | SMUG - Social Media University, Global", n.d., <http://social-media-university-global.org/35-social-media-theses/>.

audiences. Veterinary practices are poised to capitalize on social media with relatively little effort and cost using established mechanisms on the channels discussed. Interviews within the profession and within human healthcare substantiate significant and growing value is a social media effort.