

## ACG Practice Management Committee Toolbox

### **Marketing Your Practice in the Digital Era**

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#### **Introduction**

The concept of building a practice in today's era of medicine is vastly different than just a few years ago. Gone are the days of simply doing good work and building a grateful and faithful following of patients. The landscape of how patients find doctors, share their experiences, communicate their satisfaction, and the permanency of these perceptions is so quickly and constantly changing that it is a difficult concept to even understand. Many doctors don't bother to develop a competitive website, market their practice electronically, engage in social media, or work towards reputation management at all. As these have been emerging technologies, and fall outside the realm of traditional medical training, it is easy to simply look the other way or wait and see what happens. But being overly cautious can be risky in itself. Rapid change does not just imply risk, however, but also opportunity.

#### **Traditional methods of Marketing**

Professional loyalty from referring doctors can be optimized by developing personal relationships, calling with important results, and helping doctors out with urgent issues. Periodic visits to referring providers' offices are a helpful means by which to check in and provide updated clinical guidelines or to introduce a newly hired associate. Most importantly, periodic visits allow for providers to inquire about the quality of care they are providing. This provides your practice with invaluable feedback necessary to improve the service you provide, and allows the referring doctors to know that your practice cares about their patients.

Sending holiday cards or gift baskets to referring offices is an excellent way to remind them of your practice and a means to simply say "thank you." This can especially endear you to an unrecognized gatekeeper of referrals, the front office staff. Mailers, newsletters, or notices focusing on new technology or services in your practice can help to keep you ahead of competitors. Purchasing ad space in a local periodical is an option. Being interviewed regarding a newsworthy story highlights you as a local expert. Lectures and seminars are opportunities that showcase your practice and present your physicians as valuable resources. An example of this is organizing a course that offers CME credit, while showcasing the talents of the members of your practice<sup>1</sup> as local experts. The face-to-face contact at such events is tremendously beneficial.

Good work is still its own reward. Remember that patients and their families can be good sources for ongoing referrals. Also, medical discussions don't have to be peer-to-peer. A great number of patients appreciate being included in workshops or support groups that have an expert present.

#### **Website Development**

There is essentially no practice that can get by in today's age without a functioning website. A website that is easy to navigate can help patients locate a practice in their area that suits their needs. Search engine optimization can help improve the visibility of a practice among search results. Even a "mature practice" will include technology savvy patients

who will want to see your picture, find your location on a mobile app, or simply gauge the professionalism of the practice. You can leverage this interest to engage in marketing, answer frequently asked questions, provide a map and listing of your hours, and have educational content available. If you believe nothing else, know that it will save you and your office staff countless hours of telephone time.

A good website will be easy to understand, easy to navigate, and provide valuable resources for patients. Beyond the basics, your website can include secure registration, appointment making, and direct contact information. Despite the option of communicating completely online, a phone number to a live person ready to address questions is high yield. Experience suggests that live staff result in more confirmed patient appointments, and generates higher patient satisfaction scores. Having an actual human being answer one's questions provides warmth and reassurance for patients that is worth the additional expense to the practice. The website can still be a gateway to the direct human experience, just as your office staff are a gateway for the patient to ultimately see you.

### **Social media**

The electronic age is here, social media is here to stay, and whether you know about it or not, people are talking about you online. "One of the greatest risks of social media is ignoring social media," said Don Sinko, Chief Integrity Officer of Cleveland Clinic. "It's out there, and people are using it whether you like it or not. You don't know what you don't know."<sup>2</sup> By embracing social media, physicians can increase their visibility among patients and colleagues, highlight accomplishments, and develop an online presence to reach the next generation of colleagues and prospective patients. Furthermore, education from trained professionals may help dispel misconceptions, combat inaccuracies, and preserve trust in the medical profession. This allows them to boost their local, regional, and national reputation as problem solvers and valuable resources to patients and colleagues.

#### **Blogging**

Writing a blog about health care issues, professional experiences, or disease states is a terrific way to deliver your thoughts to a larger audience. You can keep this strictly medical, you can delve into health care reform or other topical interests, or you can be personal and insightful. You should come up with a goal for your blog and keep that in mind whenever writing. Do you want the most number of readers, to augment your professional reputation, to bring in new patients, or to deliver medical news to a more select community?

#### **Twitter**

Twitter has seen an explosion of growth as a source for medical information and a forum for professional dialogue. There's a tremendous amount of peer to peer networking that occurs via Twitter, a kind of connectivity that is hard to find anywhere else. Articles and abstracts are often released here first. In fact, published articles in the field of gastroenterology and hepatology that were discussed on Twitter were independently associated with higher citation rates compared with those that were not, as recently published in GIE<sup>3</sup>.

In 2016, a hashtag ontology was developed to create a standardized list of hashtags for academic discussion on social media as published in AJG. This list of hashtags was agreed upon by various GI societies including ACG, AGA, ASGE, AASLD, CCF, DDW, UEG, SAGES, as well as journals including AJG, Gastroenterology, CGH, GIE, Gut, Journal of Hepatology, and Nature Reviews Gastroenterology & Hepatology.

As an example of how Twitter can be useful from the medical perspective, we discussed #MondayNightIBD with Aline Charabaty, MD. Dr. Charabaty, a national expert in IBD at Johns Hopkins, created this hashtag as a simple means for professionals to communicate with one another about interesting cases. Dr. Charabaty told us, “I am an educator; techs, fellows, anyone who will listen. But there are questions for which there may be no published answers. This is a realm where we can extend our usual clinical questions to a broader audience and ideas that are not addressed in the publications. We can ask clinical questions, take polls, and learn the nuances of others’ practices.” Additionally, Dr. Charabaty emphasizes, “it’s completely fluid. You can catch up anytime if you are busy and can’t be there, and just read through the discussions.” Dr. Charabaty’s initially small-group discussion recently hit over 200,000 impressions on Twitter. It has grown to become, as she says, “a little journal club.”

Twitter is also frequently used to amplify discourse at GI conferences through live tweeting. Communication and connections forged online can translate into real-life networks and collaborations, as apparent during in-person social gatherings that are a staple at many national conferences. This type of activity benefits everyone. All participants gain exposure. This allows for everyone to be heard, and expand and grow their individual professional and personal networks .

### **Facebook**

Facebook is the prototype for social media engagement. In fact, it may be eclipsed by newer, and “purer” forms of communication. However, it is still a very powerful tool. Whether organic readership or paid advertising is used, this is a mechanism to reach vast numbers of patients. Targeted ads can be directed to certain age groups, demographics, and even ZIP Codes. Facebook groups can also be used to target specific audiences. Facebook has become a medium for the masses, and virtually every age group is extremely engaged in this social media platform. If you want to raw numbers, Facebook might still be the best digital place to market.

### **Instagram**

Instagram is the fastest growing major social media platform, now exceeding over 1 billion active users. Each visual post is uniquely organized on one’s personal page in a “grid,” though new posts accounts followed by the user will show up in a similar news feed. The structure and visual nature of the platform typically requires posting with less frequency. Owned by Facebook, some of the advertising functionality translates across both platforms. Furthermore, other industries have capitalized on “influencers” on Instagram to promote a variety of products. The influencer phenomenon has coincided with a surge in medical professionals and trainees joining Instagram to promote their practices and share personal experiences. As a highly visual platform many users find the platform engaging.

Without the character restrictions of Twitter, individuals can post longer captions and expound on their material. Instagram has adopted functionality seen on most other popular platforms, namely the temporary 24-hour video posts of Instagram stories. Within these stories, users can post polls, Q&A sessions, and livestreams. Similar to Twitter, hashtags are critical for amplification of material on Instagram, and likewise engagement with others on the platform. Searching these GI-related hashtags will reveal who is utilizing these hashtags and potentially identify a target audience or influencers in that topic.

## **YouTube**

YouTube has been cited as the second largest search engine and is the fastest growing video sharing website in the world. Each month the site sees 5 billion views per day and 300 hours of video uploaded every minute.

Video is an effective medium of conveying information, but requires a different skill set of filming and editing.

## **Association for Healthcare Social Media.**

The Association for Healthcare Social Media (ahsm.org) is the first 501(c)(3) professional society devoted to health professional social media use. The new organization aims to provide resources to help health professionals build a health-related social media presence and to define best practices to encourage responsible social media use. By doing so, physicians can avoid missteps and potential professional pitfalls, as well as inadvertent harm toward public health. Some resources will also be for patients to better interpret health-related social media posts for accuracy. These best practices are currently in development.

## **Reputation management**

It's wonderful when something meaningful and insightful you write becomes a sensation, but it's similarly tragic if something taken out of context or misconstrued goes viral. You must keep this in mind whenever posting anything online. You should assume that anything you write anywhere online is visible to anyone, could be taken in the worst possible way, is not subject to separation of personal and professional views, and is available permanently. These facts likely keep a lot of people off-line, but they should not dissuade you completely from engaging in social media. You should just do so cautiously.

Whether you have taken charge of your professional digital presence or not, you have one. You may as well own it and drive it in the direction you want. A good exercise is to Google yourself and check the various doctor rating sites to see what people write about you. But be prepared, there will be negative comments. Experience has shown that often times, despite the initial disappointment that might result from seeing negative reviews, you can get valuable feedback regarding your overall practice. If the comments always focus on the front office staff being rude, your waiting room is dirty, or that you seem dismissive, these can be tangible action points for meaningful and positive change.

Even a negative comment itself can be spun into something positive. A response along the lines of an apology for some misunderstanding or delay, and a reaffirmation of your practices commitment to provide the highest level of care, can win over readers. People will respond to, "I am as disappointed as you are to hear this. Thank you for bringing it to my attention, and I hope you return so we can start over after I have made some very necessary changes." A negative review that goes unanswered, on the other hand, can be seen as an acknowledgment of the comments as fact or disinterest on your part. Whatever you do, do not be inflammatory or engage in any kind of hostile back and forth. The internet loves for these David and Goliath type stories to go viral.

Most of the doctor rating sites have the option for you as the healthcare provider to take ownership of that account. This allows you to put your picture and a written introduction in place. You may be able to direct people to your website from there. This looks more professional and polished, and less anonymous—anonymity being a key driver of negativity online. There's also the risk that if you do not take ownership, someone else may lay claim to it. Although most of the sites have some type of paid membership available, be wary of sites that suggest they can improve your ratings for pay.

## **Conclusion**

How doctors communicate with the rest of the world, and how our own patients find and rate us, is a game that has entered a new season. We must play in the current field conditions. Websites, electronic advertising, and social media are all extremely useful tools to augment the time honored and more traditional approaches. Define your goals clearly when using social media and stick to them. Be cautious in your approach, particularly if you venture outside of the

strictly medical with social media. Remember that people can have a tremendous number of fickle followers, or a few very dedicated and professional followers. Take charge of your online reputation, because people are talking about you whether you know it or not. And remember, at the end of the day, maintain a human touch for your office and your own individual practice. People may find you and talk about you electronically, but it still all comes down to your face-to-face meeting.

For further information, there are a number of professional discussions on these topics that take place during the national society events such as the practice management conferences, regional conferences, or the Annual Meeting of the ACG.

1. Clinical Pearls Brochure, Gastroenterology Center of CT, 2019.
2. Social media “likes” healthcare: From marketing to social business. *PricewaterhouseCoopers Health Research Institute*, April 2012.
3. Longitudinal relationship between social media activity and article citations in the journal *Gastrointestinal Endoscopy*, Smith, Zachary L. et al., *Gastrointestinal Endoscopy*, Volume 90, Issue 1, 77 - 83
4. [https://journals.lww.com/ajg/Citation/2016/08000/Harnessing\\_the\\_Hashtag\\_A\\_Standard\\_Approach\\_to\\_GI.2.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/ajg/Citation/2016/08000/Harnessing_the_Hashtag_A_Standard_Approach_to_GI.2.aspx)