

Exploring Social Media for Health and Wellness: A Health Plan Case Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The use of social media for health and wellness promotion is a relatively new concept. Nonetheless, several early adopting health plans and provider organizations have begun to design and pilot social and mobile media platforms to empower members to enhance self management of health and wellness goals. In this case study of a large health plan in Pennsylvania, the authors describe the design and execution of a member survey to identify some factors that are significantly associated with interest in adopting such technology platforms for obtaining health-related information and services. Analysis of relevant data from more than 4,000 responses indicates significant differences among important segments of the member population defined with respect to demographic factors, level of computer and social media usage, and frequency of engagement in specific online activities. They anticipate that these insights can assist health plans to develop and deploy targeted services and tools for health and wellness management.

Keywords: Computer Usage, Demographic Factors, Health and Wellness, Health Plan, Internet, Online Engagement, Social Media, Social Media Usage, Statistical Analysis, Survey

INTRODUCTION

The convergence of health reform regulation, consumer demand, market realities and technology developments are driving healthcare organizations to explore new models of care delivery and payment across the delivery spectrum (IOM, 2011a, 2011b). The *Affordable Health Care (AHC) Act* has emerged as a catalyst for changes in how insurance is obtained and how care is provided (AHC website on Healthcare.gov). The focus has shifted toward consumers and there

is an increasing demand for customer service as the concept of outcome-based health management grows (DeNicola, 2012). Employers are increasingly turning to their health insurance providers to assist them to actively manage the health of their employees in an effort to sustain high levels of productivity (Grensing-Pophal, 2009; Sarasohn-Kahn, 2009a). Layered onto this is the explosion of social media, creating an opportunity for insurers to not only market themselves using innovative tools, but to also engage their customers in highly accessible and customized ways (CSC, 2012; Sarasohn-Kahn, 2009b).

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Health insurance plans are thus exploring new and creative methods to reach out to members to offer health information, provide support, and encourage healthy behaviors, and leverage the emerging trend among consumers to play a more active and engaging role in self health management. In general, more people turn to the Internet than any other source for health related information and support. A reason for this trend can be attributed to the increasing health care costs and resulting changes in consumer behavior (Cohen & Adams, 2011). The explosion of Internet technologies has opened up new platforms to connect stakeholders such as patients, providers, and insurers. These relationships are vital to the long-term success of health care organizations.

Consumption of online media is widespread among the adult population who are active online users and is correlated with the growing penetration of broadband Internet access in the US (Estabrook et al., 2007). According to a survey that measured *patient activation*, less than half of the adults in the US, at 41.4%, have the highest (fourth) level of activation (Hibbard & Cunningham, 2008). At this level, people have the skills and confidence to manage their health; moreover, they are more likely to obtain preventive care, such as yearly health screenings, immunizations, and seek information about healthy eating habits and physical activity. At the third level (37.2%) individuals may lack confidence and skills to take action. Individuals in the first and the second levels are passive and more likely to be incapable of managing their own health effectively. The ability to move up and down rankings is possible with accumulation of health information in conjunction with willingness to be active in personal health management. This is where the use of social media can provide value, namely, to offer health information and self-health management tools and services in a quick, credible, and convenient fashion. The popularity of social media can be a transforming landscape for health management and healthcare delivery (Elkin, 2008).

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

This case study is associated with a large health plan in western Pennsylvania. For confidentiality reasons, we cannot disclose the name of the health plan and will refer to it just as “health plan” in the rest of paper. Due to same reasons, we cannot include any details pertaining to the management, economic climate and financial structure of the organization.

The health plan offers five basic medical plan designs, which are distinguished mainly by varying levels of provider-coordinated vs. self-directed care and the use of network vs. out-of-network providers. Besides consumer-specific plans, the health plan also offers a full range of commercial and government health management products and services, including commercial group health insurance, Medicare Assistance, Special Needs (SNP), Children’s Health Insurance (CHIP) and customized benefit options for smaller employer groups. It also offers disease and behavioral health management programs, including programs to help employers promote health, prevention, and wellness in the workplace.

SETTING THE STAGE

In this section, we first provide a background of the current research trend related to the use of social media in healthcare, followed by our research framework.

Social Media and Healthcare

Whether it is Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter, social media is a big part of people’s lives today. Social media uses the Internet and web technologies to facilitate social interactions by allowing for the exchange of user-generated content to share information, communicate, and collaborate (Elkin, 2008). The explosive growth of social networking sites – Facebook (845 million active users as of 2012), Twitter (140 million active users as of 2012), to name a

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