Health Care Blog Watch

Emerging Trends in the Blogosphere

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If you ignore the blogosphere ... you won’t know what people are saying about you. You can’t learn from them, and they won’t come to see you as a sincere human who cares about your business and its reputation.

—Scoble and Israel

INTRODUCTION

The concept of corporate blogging that Robert Scoble and Shel Israel wrote about in their 2006 treatise on the subject, Naked Conversations, has become not only practice for thousands of businesses but almost a necessity. Even pharmaceutical companies, which have long shied away from any kind of social marketing because of potential liability, understand that having the conventional, static Web site is just not good enough anymore in today’s digital age. The so-called blogosphere is not only “where it’s at” but also where businesses have to be if they want to connect with their customers.

In the December 2007 issue of P&T (Volume 37, No. 12), I wrote about the launches of corporate blogs by Johnson & Johnson (J&J) (www.jnjbtw.com) and GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) (www.alliconnect.com), two first-of-their-kinds for the pharmaceutical industry. Bloggers were abuzz at the time, especially over alliconnect, a branded site devoted to GSK’s over-the-counter weight-loss medication, orlistat (Alli). The Web site offered itself as a place for “conversation with us” about weight loss, but many wondered just how engaging these conversations could be, given the superregulated world of pharmaceuticals.

Initially, alliconnect seemed to be charting new territory for a pharma company, especially in promoting transparency. One of its first posts addressed the adverse effects of Alli, generating a slew of comments from readers both recommending and criticizing the product. But alliconnect’s groundbreaking start in the blogosphere was followed by disappointing product sales, the resignation of its founding blogger, and the introduction of a new, more positive tone, with less discussion of side effects. Some saw these changes as potentially a move away from the openness that the blog had championed in addressing effects of treatment.

MORE PHARMA BLOGS ON THE HORIZON?

In the spring of 2008, another pharmaceutical company, Centocor, a division of J&J, took the leap into online social media with the debut of its corporate blog, CNTO411 (cnto411.com). Named for the company’s code for drugs under development, CNTO411 might be seen as the latest movement, albeit a cautious one, toward corporate pharma blogging.

Centocor’s new blog discusses the company and topics related to health care, biotechnology, and immunology. The blog’s authors say they will also cover specific news about Centocor products on CNTO411, which would make it the first pharmaceutical blog to do so for prescription drugs; however, fellow bloggers are wary.

Ed Silverman of the pharmaceutical industry news blog, Pharmalot (www.pharmalot.com), writes:

Of course, the big elephant in the room whenever pharma discusses ‘social media’ is the fear of adverse-event reporting and liability. The new blog plans to report any adverse events that come its way, although comments will still be screened. And so CNTO411 will be another in what promises to be a long-running experiment in which communications, marketing, and legal teams clash over the extent to which pharma can—and should—engage the rest of the world. For now, such sites shouldn’t be mistaken as forums to provide an unfettered flow of information, but at least this is a start.

Another challenge for new pharma bloggers is the regular updating that is critical to blogs and that consumers expect. (When CNTO411 was last checked, its most recent post was more than three months old.) Although it is still too early to assess the effectiveness of these corporate blogs, it will be interesting to see how Centocor and future pharma bloggers fare in the blogosphere and whether they will be able to incorporate the real-time engagement and transparency that are integral to this medium.

HOSPITAL EXECUTIVE JOINS THE CONVERSATION

Hospital blogs are as rare as pharma blogs for much the same reason—potential liability—but blogger Paul Levy may be changing that. As President and Chief Executive Officer of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, he is one of the first senior hospital executives—and maybe the only one—to write his own blog. On his award-winning site, Running a Hospital (runningahospital.blogspot.com), Mr. Levy openly discusses his work and tackles some sensitive topics. In one post on the fairness of hospital CEO salaries, he shares the details of his own million-dollar paycheck and asks readers, “What do you think: Do I get paid too much?”

Mr. Levy has also caused some stir among his colleagues by publishing Beth Israel’s infection rates on his blog and by challenging other Boston-area hospitals to do the same.
IS THERE A DOCTOR ON THE BLOG?

Not everyone in the health care community has been hesitant to hop on the blogging bandwagon. Physicians increasingly have been turning to blogging as a way to share patient cases, discuss medical studies, and vent about tort reform, reimbursement rates, and other concerns that affect their clinical practice.

Kevin MD (www.kevin.md.com/blog) is one of the most famous bloggers in this niche. He is Dr. Kevin Pho, a New Hampshire internist who writes candidly about a wide range of topics from unusual medical cases to health policy. At another popular site, Musings of a Distractible Mind (http://distractible.org), Robert Lambert, MD, of Georgia (also known as Dr. Rob) ponders topics both light-hearted and serious. In one recent post that elicited comments from The New York Times and several other bloggers, Dr. Rob raises the question of how physicians should approach their overweight patients:

Perhaps I am too easy on people, but I don't like to lecture people on things they already know. …Obese people are rarely under the impression that it is perfectly fine that they are overweight. They rarely are surprised to hear a person saying that their weight is at the root of many of their problems. Obese people are the new pariahs in our culture; it used to be smokers, but now it is the overweight.

Many medical bloggers choose to remain anonymous, such as GruntDoc (http://gruntdoc.com), a Texas emergency medicine physician, who contemplates everything from his DirectTV service to the spate of emergency medical helicopter crashes over the years, as documented in Annals of Emergency Medicine (2006;47:351–356). Meanwhile, the anonymously written Notes From the Country Doctor (www.notesfromcountrydoctor.blogspot.com) offers a glimpse into rural family medicine, with one post poignantly describing a time that the blogger gave an obstetrical patient and her two young boys a ride home so they would not have to walk an hour and a half in the rain.

Blogging allows physicians and other health care providers to connect in a humane and almost intimate way with their patients and peers, but there is also a potential downside to this pastime. Some worry that medical blogging often steps too close to the limits of patient privacy and claim that discussing a specific case on a blog can sometimes be traced back to the patient through identifiable information.

Many medical blogs now include not only disclaimers but also advice for other bloggers on how to comply with HIPAA privacy rules and how to avoid potential liability lawsuits. In addition, a new ethical code has been designed specifically for bloggers in health care. The Healthcare Blogger Code of Ethics (HBCE) (http://medbloggercode.com) allows bloggers to identify the standards covering topics pertaining to confidentiality, privacy, and commercial disclosure. Both medical and patient bloggers can apply for HBCE membership and can display its logo on their sites.

PATIENTS BLOG FOR HEALTH

According to the blog search engine Technorati, hundreds of thousands of patient blogs are out there, serving as sources for the latest information about symptoms, diagnoses, and therapies for a particular disease or condition. Diabetes Mine (www.diabetesmine.com), a widely read and award-winning site, is written by Amy Toderich, a self-described “patient pundit,” who looks at the disease from all angles. In one guest post on her blog, a compliance analyst at a major drug company discusses the new regulating laws and policies concerning pharmaceutical activities and their impact on patients and providers.

Another site garnering praise is Chronic Babe (www.chronicbabe.com), an online community for younger women with chronic health problems. Created by a freelance writer with fibromyalgia and asthma, this trendy, uplifting blog offers patients hundreds of resources designed to help them “keep on being a Babe,” even with their chronic illnesses.

Patient blogs obviously offer a venue for personal expression and peer emotional support, but they are also changing the way patients educate themselves. In a post at PatientsLikeMe (http://blog.patientslikeme.com), an online social network where patients can share their personal health data, blogger Lori Scanlon writes:

Patients are talking with one another about treatment and symptoms experiences to achieve better living. Our patient members today feel empowered to take back their health, and this kind of commitment will lead to better research, better health care and better quality of life.

Although patients' blogs are still new, they appear to be having a positive effect on bloggers' own health. Indeed, a study of 50 blogs by cancer patients concluded that writing about the rigors of their illness online seemed to help them cope.2 These personal blogs can also offer valuable information to health care providers about patients' experiences, opinions, habits, and actions. In another study, researchers used a blog search engine (www.blogsearch.google.com) to find more than 100 blogs of patients with uveitis.3 By reading the blogs, the researchers were able to identify the most common sources of patients' anxiety, providing insight into how physicians might better treat and counsel individuals with this condition.

There is no doubt that blogs are here to stay; they have already crossed the threshold into mainstream acceptance.4 The health care community, in particular, is ripe for blogging and is looking for new ways to promote transparency, to educate and empower patients, and to enhance the exchange of ideas among physicians and other health care providers. And although health-related sites still account for a small percentage of the blogosphere, they are emerging rapidly and poised to have a significant impact on the health care industry.

REFERENCES