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ASK THE EXPERT ... BEN DILLON

Question: How Can I Use the Web to Improve the Health of My Community?

There has been a surge in wellness initiatives in recent years. From health fairs to 5Ks, hospitals are implementing programs to encourage their communities to adopt and maintain healthy behaviors.

Hospitals have focused on wellness and prevention for decades, but they have pursued those endeavors more as a matter of fulfilling their mission. Today, health reform is changing the way the industry looks at wellness initiatives. Providers are becoming more responsible for the health of their patients, and in turn hospitals are establishing more wellness, prevention, and early detection services.

As hospitals increase their focus on wellness, many are turning to the Web as a tool to promote and manage their initiatives. There are many benefits to using the Web, including the fact that it's effective for building community awareness as well as motivating and educating the masses about prevention. But one of the biggest benefits it offers is scalability. The Web allows healthcare marketers to promote and host events

for a large number of participants, even with limited resources.

Using the Web to build awareness

Hospitals serve large communities. Ensuring wellness events find traction takes work and sometimes a change in the status quo. That's exactly what Kelly Brockmeier, director of marketing and communications at St. Vincent's HealthCare in Jacksonville, FL, discovered when she revamped the health system's wellness outreach.

"St. Vincent's has always been active in building health awareness through community outreach," says Brockmeier. "But in the last year we've refocused our approach to appeal to a broader range of community members."

St. Vincent's recently organized three "Ladies Night Out" events at an outdoor mall to raise awareness of breast cancer, heart health, and overall wellness. All events resembled a large block party with vendors, food, music, and even fashion shows featuring patients and their inspirational stories. Free health

assessments were provided by physicians and service-line staff.

All offline and online advertisements directed visitors to the St. Vincent's Web site, www.jaxhealth.com. St. Vincent's also created an event through its Facebook page for each outing, posted live tweets from the events, and added post-event videos to the organization's YouTube channel.

"Participants promoted our events online by reaching out to their own social networks, helping us build awareness," says Meisha Joyce, Web producer at St. Vincent's. "Fashion show participants at our breast cancer event were very active online, extending our message to their circles through their Facebook and Twitter connections. In addition, our celebrity guests used their large base of followers on Twitter to promote our wellness events in the social media space."

Before and after each of the three events, St. Vincent's saw an increase in Facebook interactions and in Twitter followers. Key service lines also saw an increase in traffic,

launching many of the service-line sections into the top-viewed pages on the Web site.

“We received the most traffic we’ve ever seen to our weight-loss pages during the week of the wellness event,” says Joyce. “Our bariatric surgery call center was overwhelmed.”

Brockmeier adds: “All of the events were wildly successful, and both our Web site and social media efforts played an important role in that success. We were able to promote our health system and our experts. We received tremendous community support and strengthened physician relationships. The key to success was that we made it about the patients – not about St. Vincent’s.”

Using the Web to motivate

Changing behavior takes time. Individuals need to be motivated to act, encouraged to maintain good behaviors, and rewarded for progress.

To help its community become more active, Owensboro (KY) Medical Health System sponsors an annual Get Movin’ contest. Participants create teams, visit the organization’s HealthPark health and fitness facility for assessments, and track the amount of time they exercise at www.getmovin2011.com – a vanity URL that redirects visitors to a section on the main Web site, www.omhs.org.

“Our site was the central piece of the contest,” says Brian Hamby, marketing specialist at the Owensboro system. “It’s where we received registrations, where participants logged their minutes and checked their standings, and most importantly, it’s where we motivated people.”

Get Movin’ 2011 was a 12-week event, so it was important to keep

participants engaged. Halfway through the competition, the organization placed team stories online to inspire participants. It also started a “30-minute club” to recognize teams online that averaged 30 minutes of exercise each day.

“Many hospitals have a mission to serve their communities,” says Barbara Taylor, marketing director at the Owensboro system. “Our mission is to heal the sick and improve the health of the community. We take this mission seriously, and the Get Movin’ challenge is one of the ways [our organization] supports healthy habits and encourages increased levels of activity.”

More than 220 teams and 1,400 individuals participated in the 2011

Get Movin’ campaign. Participants recorded 3.9 million minutes of exercise online, and approximately 85 new members joined HealthPark.

Using the Web to educate

Education is key to a future in which health consumers are actively engaged and making sensible choices. Healthcare marketers are finding new ways to use the Web to educate consumers about how to lead more healthy lifestyles.

Tri-City Medical Center in Oceanside, CA, just finished its second year as the title sponsor of the popular marathon and half marathon races in nearby Carlsbad. “The Tri-City Medical Center Carlsbad Marathon and Half Marathon has provided us with the

The screenshot shows the Tri-City Medical Center website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, About Us, Contact Us, Maps & Locations, and a search box. Below the navigation is a banner image showing a group of people's feet wearing various running shoes. The main content area is titled "Running Shoe Selection" and includes a video player showing a woman in a red shirt talking to a woman on a treadmill in a gym. The sidebar on the left lists various links under the "Marathon" category, including "Lucky 14 Contest Winners", "Runner's Story", "Marathon Training", "Trainer's Page", "Shoe Selection", "Safety & Etiquette", "Stretching", "Technique", "Strength Training", "Pilates and Yoga", and "Hydration". The right sidebar contains a "I Want To" section with links for "Make a donation", "Give blood", "View baby photos", "Volunteer", "Research a topic", and "Search for a job". Below this is a "Running Shoes" section with the text "Find the right running shoes".

opportunity to partner with the community and provide wellness education, not just illness services,” says Kelli Moors, Tri-City manager of public affairs and marketing.

The three-day event attracted more than 10,000 runners and included a large health expo. Tri-City exhibited at the expo and had numerous service-line representatives available to talk with the approximately 50,000 participants who stopped by the booth. Oncology physicians performed skin cancer screenings, occupational therapists offered advice on how to protect joints, and Tri-City’s wellness center provided body fat testing and offered free day passes to the center.

Advertising for the event drove visitors to the Tri-City Web site, www.tricitymed.org, which featured a section dedicated to the event (see screenshot, page 2). The site presented educational information and “Tri-Tips” videos with advice on everything from how to select the right running shoe to how to properly stretch for the marathon. Tri-City also promoted a contest where runners competed for a spot on the hospital’s team and the opportunity to train with the organization’s wellness center experts. Winners were branded the “Lucky 14,” and promoted on the site.

“The event is a huge morale booster for the community, physicians, and our employees – and it translates into real successes,” says Moors.

“The wellness center saw a huge surge in membership after the event. Relationships between Tri-City Medical Center and the local physicians improved. And more than 20 local charities benefited from the proceeds.”

Tri-City is already at work preparing for the 2012 event and plans to add

an interactive runner’s blog and more educational videos to the site.

Using the Web for scalability

The growing role of wellness promotion does not necessarily come with a corresponding growth in budget or staff. Many healthcare marketers turn to the Web for scalable and economically feasible solutions.

Lubbock (TX) Heart Hospital is recognized as a premier cardiac hospital in its region. To help raise awareness of heart disease, the hospital holds an annual heart classic golf tournament. Chad Elrod, director of marketing and public relations at Lubbock, promotes the event using both offline and online channels and has found the role of the Web to be growing.

“The Web definitely helps us reach new audiences and maintain our reputation as an advocate of heart health awareness,” says Elrod. “But it has also been instrumental in my ability to streamline the registration process for the golf tournament.”

This year marked the first time Lubbock offered golfers the ability to register for the event online at www.lubbockhearthospital.com. In past years, registrations came in by fax and left Elrod with many follow-up calls to clarify illegible information. Elrod is already looking at expanding the use of the Web in the future by adding a payment feature.

Owensboro Medical Health System’s marketing specialist agrees that the Web is essential for managing large events. “I couldn’t imagine managing our Get Movin’ contest without the Web,” says Hamby. “The registration alone for 220 teams, not to mention the weekly logins and standings reports, wouldn’t have been possible to handle without the Web.”

The future of wellness and the Web

“Most healthcare organizations understand that between reform and an overall increased focus on prevention, it’s time we partner with patients for their health,” says Moors of Tri-City Medical Center. “For the first time, healthcare marketers are focused on promoting wellness instead of illness.”

Wellness is at a tipping point as health reform moves programs from mission to mandate. Whether due to new care delivery models, changing reimbursements, or a response to the growth of chronic, preventable diseases, there is a definite shift underway.

Healthcare marketers are already developing wellness programs and using the Web to educate and motivate their communities. As hospitals begin to implement reform initiatives, healthcare marketers will be doing more than just engaging patients – they will be trying to improve outcomes and prevent illness. The Web’s role will also evolve, and marketers will move from using the Web predominantly as a communication tool to implementing more personalized applications that promote health improvement. They will be adding online features, such as predictive modeling to identify and educate visitors most at risk for preventable diseases, secure electronic messaging to allow patients to communicate with the care team online, and health diaries to track and report progress toward health goals.

“Personalized interventions will be the future of healthcare marketing,” says John Hallick, president and CEO of CPM Marketing Group, a healthcare data management company in Madison, WI. “There’s a small portion of the patient population that accounts for the majority of preventable costs. The healthcare

system is willing to invest in reaching out to [members of] that group with targeted communications, educating them, engaging with them, and motivating them to change.” eH

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