

HealthGrades – Special Report

Where Will You Find Your Next Patient?

*How Hospitals Can Build and Leverage
Their Online Patient Acquisition Power*

Learn how today's consumers are using the web to shop for health care services, and how you can use this information to make sure new patients choose your hospital.

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Today, hospitals face a stark challenge that can no longer be underestimated. To increase market share, fuel profits and further their community reputation, hospitals need to reach out and communicate in clear terms why consumers should trust them with their health and wellness. This task is not as easy as it used to be.

One reason is that health care consumers are much more sophisticated than in the past. This sophistication is the result of economic pressures and an increasing range of powerful technologies the public has at its fingertips. With the increased use of desktops, laptops and mobile devices, shopping for health care online is trending upward at a rapid rate.

This special report examines the patient acquisition challenges hospitals face in a competitive business environment. It also offers compelling reasons why increasing the use of strategic, innovative online programs is essential to every hospital's long-term success.

Immediate challenges confronting hospitals

No longer the only game in town, hospitals have a growing number of competitors who are actively reaching out to consumers. Such competitors include:

- Ambulatory surgery centers
- Physician-owned hospitals
- Diagnostic imaging centers
- Rehabilitation facilities
- Centers of excellence
- Specialty health clinics, i.e., weight loss centers

In addition to more competitors, hospitals must confront the fact that consumers are becoming fiercely independent. They no longer walk in lockstep with every recommendation given to them by a primary care doctor or specialist. Instead, when selecting a health care facility or practice, many prospective patients study their options online and ask specific questions of every organization they are considering. Some of their main concerns are:

- How qualified is the hospital or physician?
- Am I likely to have a good outcome?
- What's their area of specialization?
- How innovative are their programs?
- Will I have an emotionally satisfying experience with them?
- Are there online ratings and reviews I can read to help me make a decision?

Given this sweeping change in how patients make informed health care decisions, how can hospitals increase market share, stay competitive, and drive more patients through their doors? They must reach out and meet consumers where more and more of their health care choices are being made—on the Internet.

The upward trend in “shopping” for health care online

According to a study released by the Pew Research Center in February 2011, 80% of all Internet users go online to research health information. This means that among those tracked by the Pew Internet Project, learning about health care is the third most popular online activity behind e-mail (94%) and search engine use (87%).

Given that one-quarter of adults do not use the Internet, the percentage of those seeking health care information online is 59% of the total U.S. population.¹ That’s nearly six of every 10 adults.

When you examine these numbers at a more granular level, a growing body of research indicates that consumers are searching for information online about physicians and hospitals. This is a departure from only a few years ago when prospective patients utilized the Internet primarily to research information about specific diseases or medical treatments.

For example, in a 2003 report on the top online health searches, 63% were performed to learn about a disease or medical problem. Only 21% of searches were done to learn about a hospital or physician.²

Today, 47% of searches are performed to research doctors or health professionals, and 38% are done to learn more about hospitals and other medical facilities. This means the percentage of people going online to search specifically for hospitals or physicians has increased significantly since 2003.

It is wise to assume that the percentage of consumers searching for information about doctors and hospitals will continue to rise as Internet technologies become more powerful.

What’s abundantly clear from these numbers is that your prospective patients are no longer just searching WebMD to learn about a disease their hospital physician has talked to them about. In growing numbers they are using the Internet to decide if they want to utilize your physicians and facility in the first place.

The conclusion here is simple. Hospitals can no longer afford to dedicate less than 10% of their marketing budgets to online initiatives. It’s now essential to a hospital’s long-term growth that it reach out and engage consumers where they are congregating and doing research in increasing numbers—online.

How you can use this information to make sure new patients choose your hospital

To attract new business, hospitals should accept that they have to approach patient acquisition in the same manner as large corporations. The good old days of physician referrals, publishing newsletters and relying on mass media campaigns to generate publicity are gone. In fact, in many cases, traditional forms of advertising have become wasteful in terms of the most effective ways to allocate your marketing dollars.

Hospitals must embrace innovative means of showcasing their physicians and services through online tools, such as social media and hospital/physician referral sites.

Putting physicians out front is essential to driving more traffic into your hospital. A great first step is to have doctors build a detailed online profile. The more information physicians make available online, the more likely they are to engage patients and bring them into your hospital. The more specific physicians are with their online profile, the greater the chance they can build long-term relationships in which patients have satisfying experiences and outcomes in your facility.

For example, through a professionally developed online profile, patients can determine if a physician runs a family oriented practice that would be great for their kids, or a practice that is more suited for rehabilitating athletes and weekend warriors.

Establishing such an online presence through blogs and social media sites like Facebook is fine. However, building a reputation and engaging consumers through these platforms presents two obvious challenges:

- How do you create a professionally designed page that includes specific information that will effectively engage consumers?
- How do you drive traffic to a blog or social media page?

A preferred solution to these challenges is to utilize a respected hospital/physician referral site that already attracts thousands of unique visitors each month. There are multiple advantages to partnering with such a site:

- **First**, you don't have to drive traffic to your online profile. Instead, you place your online profile where the traffic already flows in abundance.
- **Second**, prospective patients who visit such sites are highly inclined to set an appointment, because in most cases that's why they're visiting the site.
- **Third**, patients look at profiles relevant to their specific needs, so hospitals can message these patients directly, instead of targeting a mass audience who may or may not have a specific health condition.

Such referral sites are easy to use, secure, and they are usually free. Plus, physicians have access to tools that enable them to develop and maintain online profiles that include key elements that are proven to engage and motivate patients such as:

- Conditions treated
- Procedures performed
- Photos and videos
- Accepted health plans
- Care philosophy (practice style and interests)

Referral sites also provide data that details the type of prospective patients who visit their site. Knowing this information further helps you design your online profile. For example, 71% of the visitors to HealthGrades.com are female. Research indicates that women outpace men when it comes to searching for health care information online.³

In addition, trusted physician referral sites have a high volume of web site traffic that hospital sites are unable to match in most cases. When physicians create profiles on referral sites, they can take advantage of the heavy traffic already coming to the site, without having to expend marketing dollars to create it.

Referral sites also offer a highly targeted audience. Whereas hospital sites often get the most hits on the “directions” or “location” pages, patients come to referral sites seeking specific health information—meaning they are ripe for your relevant messages.

Online outreach engages physicians

With access to facts about their target audience, physicians can develop profiles that attract visitors based on detailed search criteria. Overall, the tools available through traffic-heavy referral sites allow physicians to:

- Attract more patients that are a good match for their practice
- Control their online reputation
- Utilize and respond to patient surveys
- Respond to patient satisfaction ratings and reviews
- Update their profile as often as they want

Physician referral sites offer an opportunity to engage your physicians—they give doctors another outlet to communicate with patients, grow their practice, and even market themselves if they are new doctors.

Physician referral sites also offer doctors very precise measurement analytics. Doctors can review their profile and see how many patients have viewed it in comparison to other physicians. They can also see how many appointments have been booked with them as a result of this traffic.

Such specific analytics enable physicians and hospitals to more accurately measure the effectiveness of the online medium. Choosing to invest in these sites' enhanced search and physician-finding programs allows hospitals to easily and accurately track ROI. Compare this to the ROI of an "old school" mass media campaign that includes billboards and yellow page ads. Such outdated campaigns are expensive, and tracking office visits generated as a result of billboard or newspaper ads is extremely difficult. Lastly, when patients trust a physician/hospital referral site, that trust is often transferred to the physicians and hospitals that have positioned themselves well on the site.

To effectively tap into the growing number of prospective patients who are searching for physicians and hospitals online, many hospitals and physicians now align themselves with health care referral sites that specialize in driving new patients to them.

Using these sites is a proven means of increasing new patient flow into your hospital. Leveraging the search capabilities, analytics and traffic flow available through such sites is an excellent way to spearhead an online patient acquisition program.

The statistics don't lie.

Today, consumers are shopping for physicians and hospitals online in increasing numbers—and this new reality is certain to continue on an upward trend. To stay competitive, it's essential that hospitals shift more dollars to their online marketing budgets and engage prospective patients on a proactive basis.

Positioning your hospital and physicians on a trusted, traffic-heavy referral site is one option you can use to fully leverage your marketing dollars, increase physician engagement, and ultimately, create a greater flow of new patients through your facility.

References

¹Pew Internet and American Life Project, February 2011

²Pew Internet and American Life Project, July 2004

³Pew Internet and American Life Project, February 2011

About HealthGrades

HealthGrades is the number one physician referral site, offering the most accurate, in-depth information available to consumers. We are also the leading health care ratings organization, providing ratings and profiles of hospitals, nursing homes and physicians to consumers, corporations, health plans and hospitals.

Millions of consumers and hundreds of the nation's largest employers, health plans and hospitals rely on HealthGrades independent ratings, consulting and products to make informed health care decisions.

Founded in 1999, the firm is headquartered in Denver, Colorado, and has over 200 employees.



999 18th Street, Suite 600
Denver, Colorado 80202

1.800.940.4179
www.HealthGrades.com/business

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