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Medical Information Technology

Twitter and Ning: How Can Docs Use Social Networking Tools

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Social networking web sites are growing by leaps and bounds and sites such as *Facebook* and *My Space* have almost 200 Million registered users worldwide. The growing popularity of social networking web sites has spilled into all areas of our society and infiltrated our daily life and language.

What are social networking sites? According to a Wikipedia definition, a social network service uses software to build online social networks for communities of people who share interests and activities or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Most services are primarily web-based and provide a collection of various ways for users to interact, such as chat, messaging, email, video, voice chat, file sharing, blogging, discussion groups, and so on. Social networking sites created almost overnight virtual communities of individuals and businesses alike. Anybody can interact with each other or within groups that share common business interests and goals. In many ways social networking has transformed the way we communicate and share information with one another in today's society.

So what can we do with social networking web sites? It's important to understand that social networks connect people at a low cost and globalize the marketplace. This "new" form of meeting can surpass and even replace the traditional face-to-face interaction. This new technology makes it possible for people to network with their peers from anywhere, at anytime in an online environment. Well designed social network services attract, aggregate and assemble large business-focused audiences by creating informative and interactive meeting places. These networks often act as a customer relationship management tool for companies selling products and services and are considered by entrepreneurs and small businesses as an attractive and useful tool to expand their contact base and market penetration. Companies can also use social networks for advertising in the form of banners and text ads. Since businesses operate globally, social networks can make it easier to keep in touch with contacts around the world. A professional network is used for the business to business marketplace. These networks improve the ability for people to advance professionally. Business professionals can share experiences with others who have a need to learn from similar experiences. Can social networking software help doctors to reach out to their patients or to each other? In my opinion doctors can use social networking sites as a means to manage institutional knowledge, disseminate peer to peer knowledge and to reach out to their patients or potential customers.

Pharmaceutical companies are already eying social networking sites as a tool to influence the opinion leaders of social networks and are spending an increasing percentage of their marketing dollars attempting to penetrate those networks.

Two software applications should be of special interest for doctors:

Twitter is a free social networking and micro-blogging service that allows users to send "updates" (or "tweets"; text-based posts, up to 140 characters long) to the Twitter web site, via the Twitter web site, short message service (SMS), instant messaging, or a third-party application such as *Twitterrific* or *Facebook*.

Updates are displayed on the user's profile page and instantly delivered to other users who have signed up to receive them. The sender can restrict delivery to those in his or her circle of friends (*delivery to everyone is the default*). Users can receive updates via the Twitter website, instant messaging, SMS, RSS, email or through an application. This service could be used by doctors to reach a group of patients with chronic diseases such as Diabetes. Weekly SMS messages could motivate patients to check their blood pressure and weight and to send the information back to the physician's office.

Ning is an online platform for users to create their own social websites and social networks. It appeals to users who want to create networks around specific interests or have limited technical skills. The unique feature of Ning is that anyone can create their own custom social network for a particular topic or need, catering to specific audiences. Ning has two primary business models. One allows users to create a network for free, in exchange for the network hosting ads that Ning supplies. The other, their "Ning for Business" option, offers users a network where they control the ad content (or lack thereof), in exchange for a monthly fee.

Again, Ning can be a very useful tool to reach out and to dialogue with patients suffering from specific disease. It also opens the possibility for virtual group visits once a patient-physician relationship has been established at the office.

I hope that this review was helpful to understand and apply social networking tools in your medical practice.

Disclosure: The author is a practicing family physician, addiction specialist and computer consultant.