

»» Communication trends in the Health Sector: More empowered patients and a more accessible sector

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There is no doubt that our health is important to all of us. As a result, it has become one of the industries that carries the most weight on the global economy.

Key players in the health sector often come across and overlap one another, including insurance companies, administrators, hospitals and clinics, pharmaceutical firms, specialized authorities, regulators, doctors, nurses and family members. Each of them responds to their own interests, relationships and objectives, but in the middle of this panorama there is always an individual, whether they be a patient, client or user.

For a long time, organizations built an unbalanced relationship with their stakeholders, being the ones who defined the parameters of their communications efforts and established the rules. However, this dynamic has experienced a radical change over the past few years.

The increasing and unstoppable empowerment of users and patients, who have begun to understand their rights and how to use communication tools in their benefit, has radically transformed the dynamics of the relationship between individuals and organizations.

Patients and their families have become highly informed consumers able to express their opinions and engage in discussions while holding high expectations of service and quality. The transformation of passive patients into informed consumers able of making suggestions and entering into intelligent discussions with doctors, suppliers and insurers, is a trend¹ that is expected to keep growing in the upcoming years, becoming the focus of health sector communications.

As a result, we need to look into those aspects that are going to define the parameters of health communication.

THE EMPOWERMENT OF PATIENTS

One out of twenty searches in Google² is related to health issues, which shows how the way in which content is created and shared has undergone a complete transformation. Now more than ever, consumers are a click away from an abundance of scientific and empirical information about investigations, lifestyle, diseases, products, drugs, suppliers and professionals.

The increase in user generated content has facilitated information sharing, which is seen as a democratic practice, controlled by patients and independent professionals. Interchanging information about diseases, treatments and experiences with suppliers helps patients become in control of their own decisions. Actors in the industry must accept this reality. The days when patients and their families used to accept the outcomes dictated by professionals and medical organizations are long gone. Now they must face their "clients" questions, be more accessible and be able to respond to these challenges in an integral manner.

In response, organizations must be adept at managing expectations and assuring that their personnel is capable of managing communication channels so as to make the lives of patients, users, and their families easier.

EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

Advertising is not going to disappear, but it is becoming increasingly obvious that there should be a balance between paid campaigns and content generation, a tendency that cannot be reversed. According to the Pew Research Center³, 72 per cent of Internet adult users in the U.S. look for information on health related matters online.

Organizations have begun generating content in an attempt to resolve health-related questions patients and users may have. Web pages about disease-prevention, lifestyle and nutritional advice dominate the discussion between individuals and organizations, as they have realized that education has become a basic tool to promote understanding between the parties.

¹ <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/proteccion-social/promocion-social/Paginas/Calidad-salud-deberes-derechos-mecanismos.aspx>

² <https://googleblog.blogspot.com.co/2015/02/health-info-knowledge-graph.html>

³ <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/health-fact-sheet/>



TECHNOLOGIES TO BECOME MORE ACCESSIBLE

The interaction between the users and the media is changing the way in which the health industry communicates with its patients. Today everyone is in possession of more than one screen: computers, televisions, tablets, watches, cell phones. As they receive messages through one channel, they verify said information through their smartphones or tablet. How do we take advantage of this trend?

Apps and online services have become a fundamental piece in facilitating communication between doctors and their patients. Apps allow users to become closer to the organizations and establish direct channels of communication, making people feel as though there is a backup system capable of responding to their needs. We are referring to online medicine, pages that allow to book express appointments with specialized doctors or 24 hour monitoring services for the correct treatment of patients.

Far from seeing them as distancing tools, these new technologies and the growing amount of communication channels should be seen as bridges to promote communication and transparency, allowing patients to feel that their doctor is by their side and has the time to talk to them⁴.

THE BIG DATA

The accumulation of data and knowledge is transforming the lives of people within different sectors of the economy. Some of these sectors, particularly those related to consumption, have learned how to take advantage of this knowledge, giving clients what they really need before they are even aware of it.

Health needs to take this step. People are starting to accumulate information about themselves. The use of "trackers" -watches that let us know how much we have slept, how many steps we have taken or what our heart rate is- is a great example of this tendency of people wanting to get to know themselves better than ever before.

A study made by pharmaceutical firm GlaxoSmithLine about mentions to their drugs in social media showed that there were more than 6 million comments on Twitter and more than 15 million on Facebook. What to do with all this information? How can we use all these data that patients are freely publishing? Proper use of this information will help health organizations better understand their patients and develop a much closer relationship focused on solving their concerns.

CONCLUSIONS

Companies in the health industry have a great task ahead of them. Patients are becoming increasingly empowered, not only because of the access to knowledge they have acquired thanks to the Internet, but also because of the communication channels they use to express their rights. They are no longer passive subjects and have become an active group that does not hesitate to make their voice heard.

Faced with this reality, organizations must learn how to adapt, not as to avoid greater "evils" but to transform the way in which they communicate with their stakeholders and show them they are capable of elevating communication to the same level of the services they offer.

Most of the time it is a lot easier than what it seems. All they ask for is time to talk and be heard. That is why it is necessary to see this new context as an opportunity to lead the conversation, achieve a better public positioning and obtain stronger loyalty from patients and users.

⁴ http://www.nuance.es/empresa/sala-de-prensa/notas-de-prensa/150415_Nuance_.docx

⁵ <http://www.apcoworldwide.com/blog/detail/apcoforum/2014/06/10/health-care-and-big-data>

⁶ <http://www.healthcareglobal.com/tech/2091/How-pharma-companies-are-using-social-media-to-learn-about-drugs-affects-on-patients>



David Viñuales is senior director at LLORENTE & CUENCA Colombia. He has a Bachelor's degree in Information Sciences from the Universidad de Navarra, Spain, a Master in International Relations and Communication from the Universidad Complutense, Spain, and a certificate in Business Organizational Communication from the TEC of Monterrey, Mexico. David has more than 20 years of experience as a journalist in Spain, Dominican Republic and the U.S.

dviñuales@llorenteycuenca.com



Natalia Vargas is account manager at LLORENTE & CUENCA Colombia. She has a degree in Political Science from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, a specialization in Public Opinion and Political Marketing from the same university, and a Master in Marketing from University College Dublin. Natalia began her career as communications analyst at a local communications firm, where she reached the position of Project Director. She worked for the International Organization for Migration, where she led communication efforts at the Program for the Reintegration of Veterans and the Unity of Public-Private Alliances and Social Marketing.

nvargas@llorenteycuenca.com



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