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## Community Building Versus Narcissism in Healthcare Marketing

By Dan Dunlop



Think about how you act when you host a dinner party. You are strategic when you develop the guest list, and bring people together that have commonalities. You greet people as they arrive and introduce them to others. And you facilitate conversation by suggesting interesting topics and by filling in during those awkward moments of silence. Finally, you thank your guests for coming. Those are the same practices you can employ to build a successful online community—whether it’s a Facebook page, Twitter feed or patient forum. But we’re not there yet.

### A Cautionary Tale

In the story from Greek mythology, Narcissus saw his reflection in a pool of water and fell in love with it. His love of his own image would eventually lead to his downfall. Unable to leave the beauty of his reflection, he drowned. The story of Narcissus’ attraction to his own image reminds me of the fixation that some health systems, hospitals and physicians have with seeing themselves featured in TV commercials, print ads, and on billboards. If you’ve worked in healthcare marketing for more than a few months, you’ve undoubtedly faced a request from a service line leader who wants to see a

photo of himself or his team prominently featured in an ad. It is an old, familiar story.

### Remembering Who Matters

The marketing generated by healthcare organizations can be extremely narcissistic. Our ads, brochures, websites, and billboards all scream, “Look at us,” or, “We’re Number One.” We talk about our world-class physicians, leading edge technology, advanced services, and amazing medicine.

Even on social media platforms, we have continued pushing content about our organizations. We treat these channels as new opportunities for content distribution despite the fact that social and digital platforms are ideal for listening, engaging and conversing. The true promise of social media and digital platforms lies dormant as we push inwardly focused content. For the most part, we’ve lost sight of what really matters: the patients and families we serve.

### It’s Not All About You

Patients value reliable, high quality health information. Marketers argue, aren’t we satisfying an important need with our marketing messages? Not exactly. Context matters. It is the difference between marketing “at” the individual versus marketing “with” the individual.

Healthcare marketing reminds me of

that friend who talks only about himself. He never asks about you and how things are going in your life. Every time you get together it is all about him. Do you find people like that interesting? Yet this is how hospitals and health systems frequently come across in their marketing. Your content is far more likely to engage people if it invites conversations, questions, and sharing.

### Getting Their Attention

Consumers today are participants in marketing. They engage in the experience. They follow, like, tweet, share, pin, snap, comment and post. Consumers take in information on multiple devices and platforms, at the time and place of their choosing. Their attention is fragmented and they are driven to seek out the information they desire – on their terms. So how do you get them to stop for a moment and engage with your information?

### Communities Based on Shared Interests

You create community. We need to create safe environments where consumers can have health conversations, access quality health information, meet our clinicians, and engage with others who are facing similar health challenges.

As human beings we are naturally drawn to others who share our interests. Think about that initial conversation when you



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meet someone for the first time. Often that conversation is a search for common ground. Shared interests, once they've been identified, are the foundation for a relationship.

**Building Blocks of Community**

Most of us already know how to build community. There are basic principles that we should adhere to whether we're creating community via a Facebook page, Twitter feed or any other platform. These principles include:

- Reciprocity
- Commonality
- Connecting – linking individuals with resources and people
- Listening
- Valuing the opinions of others
- Support – emotional and informational
- Kindness and civility
- Feeling valued and appreciated

**Why Patients Seek Out Communities**

In the world of healthcare marketing, we deal with patients, prospective patients, and family members who all want very specific things. Look at online behavior and you quickly gain insights into what they are looking for. They are looking for groups or communities where they can:

- Gather quality health information related to their condition
- Access resources
- Gain emotional support
- Have the opportunity to meet and learn from others who face similar health challenges
- Share their stories
- Know that they are not alone

If you can meet these needs through your marketing, then you are offering them real value. Hospital websites and digital platforms often fail to meet these needs and desires, driving healthcare consumers to turn to other online communities and forums.

**Learn From Successful Online Communities**

Healthcare marketers need to pay close attention to online communities. Just look at the success of online patient support communities created by PatientsLikeMe and Inspire.com. PatientsLikeMe has more than 350,000 members with 1,500+ niche communities organized by disease or condition. Inspire.com has more than 500,000 members overall with 80,000+ people participating in roughly 20 rare disease communities. Inspire.com's communities are formed in partnership with national patient organizations. Patients and family members are finding the support, information, camaraderie and guidance they are looking for within these communities.

**An Online Health Community For Everyone**

Select any health topic and you will find a variety of online communities where people gather. These communities can take the form of a blog, private Facebook group, Twitter chat, LinkedIn Group or even a website. Examples are everywhere. When it comes to women's health there's:

- Fab Over Fifty Health Blog
- EmpowHER
- Speaking of Women's Health
- The Healthy Women Community

There are disease specific communities for cancer patients:

- MD Anderson's CancerWise Blog
- Cancer Compass
- Cancer Survivors Network
- ACOR online communities

Others sites focus on the rare-disease community:

- PatientsLikeMe
- Inspire.com
- RareConnect
- NORD's Rare Disease Communities

**Marketing Viewed Through the Lens of Community**

We would be better off as marketers if we let the principles of community building influence everything we do—from how we manage our social media platforms to how we design our websites. Think about your organization's website. How would your website change if your focus was on building community? What functionality might you add? There are so many steps you could take to enrich the site visitor's experience. You could give visitors the opportunity to rate, share, and comment on content, or add a live chat feature, engaging video, and a patient blog where patients can submit their stories.

On social media you would become responsive to comments and questions and let people know that it is a forum for conversation rather than simply a one-way communications tool.

**Forging Relationships, Creating Value**

A community building mindset leads to the development of marketing environments where relationships can be forged and thoughtful sharing of information can take place. Within these environments your messaging can flourish and healthcare consumers can deepen their engagement with your organization's brand. By engaging potential patients within these community platforms you create the possibility for real communication to take place and information to be exchanged.

If we can bring those basic principles to our marketing, and abandon the narcissistic practices of old, we will be well on our way to building successful communities where our messaging will be well received and our organizations will be seen as providing real value to those we seek to serve.