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Health Care Marketing Trends for 2020—and Beyond

Wondering which tactics and tools are worth prioritizing this year—and what fads are fading? Consider these insights, predictions and suggestions from industry experts.

By Robby Brumberg

Health care marketers have an opportunity to be heroes. Emotional storytelling, compelling content and attention-grabbing campaigns can help organizations thrive and drive more profitability, but it's no easy task. How can you succeed in a fiercely competitive, volatile industry that's fraught with consumer mistrust?

There's no one-click fix to cure your marketing ills, but savvy practitioners can skip ahead of competitors by prioritizing crucial trends and techniques.

IN THE OFFING THIS YEAR

If your digital efforts are anything less than scalpel-sharp, you have very little chance of accomplishing much for your business in 2020. Active social media channels, a seamless, mobile-friendly website and SEO-centric content are now merely table stakes. Savvy marketers must

produce content that's compelling, educational and useful for potential patients.

"As the marketing world gets more complex and fragmented, providing a consistent, customer-centric message across channels is critical," says Heather Swedin, global head of employee communication for Novartis Pharmaceuticals.

"We'll continue to see a focus in content marketing, but I predict less emphasis on volume and more on value creation."

Swedin also foresees a greater emphasis on personalization and letting consumers shape the direction of messaging. She says: "People want and expect to receive personalized content that speaks to their needs. As a result, I think we'll see hyper-targeting taking an audience-led approach to content."

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Of course, some things stay the same. Telling great stories, for instance, remains essential to setting your practice apart and establishing a genuine connection with your audience. People crave human connections, Swedin notes, which makes emotional storytelling immensely important.

“New platforms will come and go, but at the heart of it is good, old-fashioned storytelling,” she says.

“How do you use the latest from what we know from neuroscience research to grab and pull your audience in, and keep them coming back and engaging with you? As the world gets more complex and more crowded with content, those who do this well will always win.”

Both Swedin and Dan Dunlop, principal of Jennings Healthcare Marketing, predict a proliferation of health-focused podcasts in 2020. Dunlop advises trying TikTok to reach younger audiences, and he believes a dramatic uptick in the importance of voice search is well underway. He says, “How will we respond as consumers continue to use voice assistants (Alexa, Siri or Cortana) to help them find answers to health-related questions and to find appropriate providers?” (Pivoting toward conversational, longtail keywords in your specific industry niche is one tip.)

Marketing technologies, Dunlop says, offer great advantages but remain underused by most marketers. Practitioners who become proficient in CRMs, SEO, geo-targeted ads, video, automation and AI will be well ahead of the game, but empathy and ethical data collection must anchor all efforts to repair damaged public trust.

“We need to take a serious look at how we market to prospective patients and how we follow them online with our digital marketing,” Dunlop says. “There needs to be a sensitivity to the fact that we are not selling shoes or computers; we are dealing with the private health issues of our target audiences. This

should impact the ways in which we handle data and digital marketing.”

Reaching highly skeptical audiences hinges on reputation management, which health care marketers must take seriously in 2020. Bad reviews can quickly sink your reputation and drive away prospective patients, so it’s crucial to proactively monitor and manage online reviews and to make it easy for patients to provide feedback.

One way to boost your reputation is by building a consistent brand, which Dunlop sees as a major health care marketing trend. In developing marketing efforts to bolster your brand, first consider:

- What are you known for?
- What unique advice or suggestions can you offer?
- How can you educate and empower your audience to live healthier, happier lives?
- What sorts of content would prospects and patients prefer, and where would they be most likely to pay attention?

Another trend points toward larger partnerships and community collaboration to tackle societal ills.

Dunlop says:

“I’d like to think that health care marketers will find themselves spending more time working to support their organization’s population health initiatives and partnerships with community organizations.”

As provider organizations come to the realization that we cannot solve the challenges presented by the social determinants of health within the walls of the hospital, I see these organizations turning to partnerships with public health departments, community organizations and faith-based organizations. These partnerships look like the best strategy for improving public health and for addressing



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challenges such as homelessness, food deserts, access to health care services and health literacy.”

PROVING ROI, BUILDING CREDIBILITY

Marianne Chilco, director of marketing and communications at Spinal Cord Injury Ontario, suggests homing in on what drives ROI in 2020—which might mean trimming channels.

“Narrowing the number of platforms can be a great way to focus on getting the best performance from your integrated approach,” she advises, which should entail “engaging social media posts with tests on paid pushes that lead to a compelling website with ever-changing content with strong calls to action.”

Justifying your budget will also come down to demonstrating impact. As Chilco says, “Anything marketers can do to demonstrate the impact of their organization in a genuine, cost-effective way, and any tool that helps them test and measure their work will be important in 2020.”

Of course, it’s not all about cutting-edge tech and shiny tools. Success in health care marketing requires “integrity, diplomacy, compassion and entrepreneurship,” Chilco says—not to mention thick skin and a willingness to try new things.

Chilco offers more practical career advice for those newer to the industry:

“Find mentors with marketing experience in a few fields, listen well, ask lots of questions and take a good look around at marketing that strikes you as powerful or poor or surprising or insulting or creative.

Form opinions about how you’re marketed to. Decide what you like and don’t like about that latest email in your inbox or Facebook ad; question where it came from and why you’re a target.”

This career choice is about more than just selling services.

“Marketing can be a misunderstood vocation,” Chilco says, “but it offers a wide range of opportunities to improve the world and, at its core and its best, is all about human connection.”

Human connection, it seems, still reigns supreme—even amid our worldwide digital immersion. For health care marketers, the big challenge is creating those connections in genuine, meaningful ways and in a manner that inspires patients to choose your organization over the competition. That’s still the name of the game in 2020.

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