

# Blog: What to do about Dr. Google

Author: Karyn Snyder

Almost from its very inception, the Internet has been used as an essential source of medical information. Patients have become avid researchers, no longer relying only upon their doctors' advice. They feel both empowered and overwhelmed by the data at their fingertips. While healthcare professionals respect their patients' desire to become advocates for their own well-being, they are often concerned about the validity of the information informing their patients' decisions.

There exists an opportunity not only to provide accurate, valid, and useful information to patients, but to extend branding and create additional opportunities for meaningful interactions that wouldn't otherwise exist. According to [Google](#), 84% of patients use both online and offline sources for hospital research, with these searches driving nearly 3 times as many visitors to hospital sites compared to non-search visitors. The good news is that, according to the same article, patients are turning to hospitals first and foremost for information (83%) vs. health information sites (50%) or health insurance company sites (54%). Is your website up to the task? Why shouldn't you be the place they visit on the Internet, not just in the office?

## **So how do you go about becoming the go-to destination for care online too?**

### **Before you do anything else, you need to develop a strategy.**

Delivering reliable and useful healthcare information means more than simply publishing research studies online and posting doctor profiles. It is critical that any healthcare organization intending to establish itself in the arena of online information begins with a strategy.

Not only should this plan account for the production and maintenance of this content (a content strategy), but should also factor in user engagement (UX strategy) and discoverability of data (an SEO Strategy), as well as the ability to drive efficiency and profit (a content marketing strategy). So how does one become a go-to source?

#### **1. Recognize that user experience drives success.**

You need to embrace the fact that you can advance your own success **by** serving the needs of your patients. I believe this approach is necessary, especially in the realm of healthcare, where providers must reconcile their mission to care for patients with the reality of economic pressures.

While healthcare may be rooted in altruism, even non-profits need to generate revenue to provide services. That demand, along with ever-increasing pressure on margins, necessitates the streamlining of services to gain efficiencies while maintaining (or even improving) the

quality of care. Competition (and consolidation) among healthcare providers also forces them to distinguish themselves from others. The Internet provides much opportunity to do so.

## **2. Define business goals, and develop content to support them.**

Your organization's business goals should be at the heart of all communications and tools. If a hospital's patient satisfaction survey indicates, for example, that patients feel ill-prepared for scheduled medical procedures, the hospital can take measures to improve the patient experience through digital means. For example, a few days before being admitted, patients could receive:

- A checklist via e-mail or text
- Links to registration forms, hospital maps, information about waiting rooms & visiting hours
- A link to an educational video about their procedure, which they can watch on hospital's portal ([Note: 53% of patients who did not watch a hospital video were unaware they existed](#)).

In providing this content, the patient's nerves are calmed and questions answered, thus reducing panicked phone calls to a number of departments in a desperate search for information. Not only does the hospital raise patient satisfaction in this scenario, but also increases the efficiency of hospital staff by funneling communication into digital channels.

**When working in tandem, proper creation and delivery of content can support the larger goals of your organization while serving the patient population.**

## **3. Establish branding & messaging.**

In addition to achieving the standard objectives that enable the operation of the organization, a health care system may have "softer" goals around branding or messaging. It is important to note that according to [a recent report by the National Research Corporation](#) 37% of patients say reputation and brand strength drives loyalty to a hospital or health system - more than recommendations from a doctor or from family and friends. As health systems acquire diverse practices and merge with other hospitals, the need to establish your systems as a place that is at once, small and specialized enough to provide personalized and warm care, yet large and state-of-the-art, can prove to be a conundrum.

An effective content marketing strategy can help establish an identity in the community as a trusted and reliable health care provider. And a strong website that goes beyond the typical list of departments and contact numbers can amass more new patients simply because it seeks to interact with the patient in a meaningful way via this touchpoint, not just when the patient walks through the doors of the facility. This strategy can only succeed if all parts of your organization have been informed of the greater mission and coached to leverage this

branding in all facets of patient care. Whether a person is dealing with staff in the Billing Department or the Emergency Department, there must be a cohesive patient experience, and a sense that every member of the team is there to make the patient's life better.

#### **4. Offer content that is accessible, and can be found and understood.**

Studies report that patients who conduct searches on symptoms and treatments are often close to conversion. This should factor heavily into a hospital's content and business strategy. It is, therefore, critical that SEO best practices are employed to make this type of information discoverable to the average patient. With [43% of hospital traffic being generated by search](#), it is critical that content and metadata rely heavily on layman's terms, not medical jargon.

Content should also be marked up with metadata that encourages interaction. Rich Snippets provide users with a preview of content within a search engine, while Facebook Open Graph tags & Twitter Cards enable content to be shared in a formatted manner that encourages clicks.

Once the patient has arrived at the website to read this trusted information, the user experience should encourage further engagement with the healthcare system. The website should contextually present related information, such as support groups, classes & events. It should also allow patients to easily connect with specialists, request appointments, and locate nearby facilities.

#### **5. Create audience personas & map user journeys.**

The aforementioned scenario suggests a new patient's interaction with your content, but there is an assortment of users visiting a hospital's website for a variety of reasons. Each of these needs to be taken into account when developing a content strategy to support their user journeys.

New & existing patients may have very different needs and take different paths to get to the services needed. The content and the UX should offer clear direction to allow for online booking of an appointment vs. disputing a charge on a medical bill, for instance. A relative grappling with a loved one's diagnosis may seek information and support in a way that is very different from a remote doctor whose search for specialists in a rare conditions has led to your website.

Before any coding has begun and any content has been written, these audience personas and user journeys should be mapped so that the information can be presented in manner that guides visitors to the proper resources and enables interaction with providers.

## **6. Determine distribution channels.**

This brings us to the next consideration: the distribution of content across channels. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), “The share of Americans that own smartphones is now 77%, up from just 35% in Pew Research Center’s first survey of smartphone ownership conducted in 2011.” With smartphones acting as a near-constant companion, the mobile experience needs to be at the forefront of a strategy. The user experience needs to be responsive, and content should be appropriately curated or edited for these devices.

## **7. Enable creation, publication & governance.**

This requires an investment not only in technology to manage information through content management systems or deliver it through personalization engines, but also in education of the patient care team that will lead to wholesale change in an organization’s mindset.

If the digital touchpoints are developed to optimize the patient experience and reinforce the goals of the healthcare provider, then it is critical that the importance of all the factors discussed up to this point are communicated throughout the organization.

Proper training and governance enables business units to contribute content that is on point and deliver service that reflects the character of the organization that has been so carefully crafted.

## **In Conclusion**

A carefully-considered strategy that invokes the principles of content management, user experience, marketing & SEO can enhance a health care provider’s digital presence, thereby establishing you as not only the go-to for both online and offline health care.

### END ###

## NOTES AND STATS

84% of patients use both online and offline sources for hospital research
Search drives nearly 3x as many visitors to hospital sites compared to non-search visitors
Patients primarily search on symptoms and condition terms towards the moment of conversion
44% of patients who research hospitals on a mobile device scheduled an appointment
53% of patients who did not watch a hospital video were unaware they existed
<b>Prospective Patients are now active partners in their medical journey</b>
Patient Journey >> Symptoms > Diagnosis > Treatment > Recovery
Search & Web Content, Family and Friends, Mobile & Tablet Devices, Online Video, Physicians, TV & Newspapers
Search is indispensable in the patient journey
Mobile is the patient's constant companion
Online video informs and connects
Brand is important to prospective patients reputation weighted at 94%, accepts healthcare plan is 90%, recommended by physician 86%, uses latest technology 85%, recommended by friends and family 51%.
Online research plays a significant role in the process
<b>48% took over 2 weeks to research before booking</b>
<b>61% visited 2+ hospital sites before converting</b>
Users tap into the following resources when researching: Hospital sites at 83%, health information sites 50%, health insurance company sites 54%, consumer generated reviews at 26%
1 in 5 patients is now booking through non-traditional means -- 21% book via computer or mobile app/browser (56% called on phone) (23% booked in person)
Patients are spreading the word. WOM is at 50%, 12% post on social network sites, 6% post a review on a website
77% of patients used search prior to booking an appt
Patients leverage it for: Discovery of new hospitals, evaluation of specific features, general information, comparison of offerings across facilities, consideration of hospitals they know
43% of visits to hospital sites originate from a search engine
Search paths are highly diverse and comprised primarily of symptoms and conditions terms
Patients are across all devices when researching. 98% on desktop or laptop, 10% on mobile phone, 8% on tablet

Resource: <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/research-studies/the-digital-journey-to-wellness-hospital-selection.html>