

Practice management

Build a communication plan to be the trusted adviser to your patient population

The unfolding Ebola scare provides a valuable lesson for physician practices: Keep your patient communication practices sharp so you remain the go-to source for patients during times of need.

Good communication not only builds trust, but also has the related effect of sustaining — and growing — your customer base, experts tell Part B News. With the glut of information available to today's consumers, differentiating your practice is paramount.

“At the time of an incident like this, it's a wake-up call that you should have a communication plan together,” says Ross Goldberg, president, Kevin/Ross Public Relations. Well-oiled communication plans can position your physician as a “trusted advisor who [patients] can turn to in times of need,” he adds.

As patients increasingly move online, building a Web presence is a key strategy for gaining audience engagement and maintaining your status as a leader because you can respond to topical events in real-time.

Prepare for a tech-savvy population

The move away from a “patriarchal” health care system has been well documented in recent years. “There's been a generational shift,” says Goldberg. “The younger generation is more participatory in the process.”

Increasingly, this means that patients are actively seeking information about their care. If you are not answering those questions and filling the information void, you may be losing out on an integral piece of your business growth.

“Like any service provider, they need to be responsive to their customer, and that means communicating with their customer through whatever means the customer wants,” Goldberg says.

5 tips for successful communication

- **Define how questions will be answered and how they will be triaged**, says Dr. Robert Wergin, president-elect, American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), and a primary care physician with Milford Family Medical Center in Milford, Neb. Wergin's practice has a nurse review questions submitted through its patient portal. The nurse answers simple questions and farms out more complicated questions to the practice doctors and non-clinical questions to the practice manager. Goldberg recommends instituting a plan prior to a high-focus case like Ebola. “At the time of crisis, that's a hard time to get your communication plan together,” he says.
- **Be accurate.** Maintain your credibility by using up-to-date, practical information. “Patients look to me for credible information about their health,” says Wergin. Look to reliable sources for your information, such as the World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), AAFP and other established leaders. “Give the facts,” urges Wergin.
- **Address fears by telling people what they don't have to worry about.** During times of stress, misinformation can be a substantial threat. “In the absence of accurate information, people tend to imagine the worst,” says Ron Harman King, CEO, Vanguard

Communications, a PR group that specializes in medical practice communications. This is as true for a potential epidemic as it is for a difficult diagnosis.

- **Speak the patient's language.** “Think less like the doctor and more like the patient,” urges King. Most people aren't clear on the differences between viruses and bacteria, let alone the ramifications of a threat like Ebola, says King. “You can't use doctor-speak with patients,” says Wergin. “You don't want to throw technical terms at them.” Most established websites, such as the AAFP's, present information at a fourth-grade reading level, so check those resources for patient-friendly verbiage.

- **Make sure your staff is educated.** During high-focus episodes like Ebola, your office may field an increasing number of calls from worried patients. Make sure frontline staff is knowledgeable and up to speed. “Be prepared to be reactive,” advises Goldberg. Staff should be ready to respond to patient inquiries through all channels of communication. Have the physician or practice manager share information gathered from reputable sources with the office staff. In times of high demand, the practice manager can take the lead to communicate directives and tips between the physician and staff.

Go online but seek traditional outlets

The proliferation of Web-based communication channels provides more ways to interact with patients than ever before. Case in point: Vanguard Communications' King says that five years ago social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter accounted for less than 3 percent of his clients' website visitors. Today, these social media channels “are the leading drivers of traffic.”

Adds King: “It's a great way to simply and proactively get in front of people.” Experts recommend the following tips for establishing and growing your reputation, whether online or through traditional means:

- **Make your website work harder.** Use your website as more than a brochure, advises King. Give your patients a steady update of the health

information they need to have. Consider timely topics, such as the likelihood of Ebola infections in the U.S. and precautions ordinary Americans might consider in case the disease spreads here; common-sense tips for the upcoming cold and flu season, especially for pregnant women and the elderly; and what parents should know about the Enterovirus D68. During events like the Ebola scare, provide timely updates to assuage fears, answer questions or connect your patients to breaking news. Less intensive times call for regular weekly or even monthly postings to keep the information fresh, advises King.

- **Post, tweet, link.** “Having a strong Internet presence increasingly means getting involved in social media,” says King, who sees Facebook and Twitter as two of the key outlets for physician practices. “Social media used to seem so strange and foreign to doctors, and now it's getting to be a major channel of communication,” says King. Twitter is a quick-time social media outlet, so have your tweets refer back to an original content or post on your website or on Facebook. Using Twitter doesn't have to eat up a lot of your time. “Even two a month is enough to convey the sense that the physician/practice is active on social media sufficiently for social media users to pay attention,” says King. As a reminder, be sure to refrain from posting patients' protected health information to stay within HIPAA rules.

- **Stand up as an expert.** Reach out to hospital or clinic leadership on behalf of your physicians and let it be known that they are prepared to speak to the media as needed. Consider participating in community forums or town hall meetings to elevate your practice's status as a thought leader in the region. — Richard Scott (rscott@decisionhealth.com).

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