

**Preventive Healthcare
Information and Social
Media: Understanding
Consumer Preferences**

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Executive Summary

Preventive health care information (PHCI) offers a low-cost pathway toward life-preserving and enhancing behaviors. Accordingly, PHCI stands to create significant social and economic value (Tacco et al., 2018). This is critical in the U.S., the lone high-income country in the world to lack universal health coverage and, at the same time, the high-income country with the highest health care spending, poorest health outcomes, highest death rates for avoidable or treatable conditions, and the lowest life expectancy at birth (Gunja et al., 2023). From smoking cessation to stress management to cancer screenings, PHCI is readily available in today's digital world. At first glance, social media represents an exciting avenue for placing such information at consumer fingertips. While social media has emerged as a powerful tool for disseminating health information, effective efforts require health marketing communication professionals to understand how consumers use popular social media platforms to gather PHCI, the type of PHCI delivery consumers prefer, and which sources of PHCI they are willing to trust. In this white paper, health marketing communication professionals will gain insights useful to the development of effective campaign design.

Preventive health care information (PHCI) is designed to inform, remind, and persuade consumers about opportunities to improve and preserve their health. Traditionally, preventive healthcare information dissemination relied heavily on face-to-face interactions with healthcare providers and printed materials. However, with the rise of the internet and social media, individuals increasingly turn to online sources for health-related information.

Statement of the Problem

Social media and networks have transformed the way individuals seek and consume information, including vital healthcare information. While this presents an unprecedented opportunity for healthcare providers to reach a wider audience, it also poses significant challenges in understanding consumer preferences and optimizing communication strategies. Identifying the most effective social media platforms for PHCI dissemination, determining preferred communication styles, and understanding source trust dynamics are crucial to leverage social media's potential to improve public health outcomes.

Background

Preventive health care (PHC), in broad terms, is any awareness and effort a consumer pursues with the intent of improving and preserving physical, mental, and/or emotional health (Cangelosi and Markham, 1994; Jayanti and Burns, 1998; Cangelosi, Ranelli, and Kim, 2012). A wide variety of services and products fall into the category of PHC, including non-prescription medications, stress management programs, nutrition programs, advanced genetic testing, and even wearable fitness devices (e.g., Fitbit).

Preventive health care information (PHCI) is designed to inform, remind, and persuade consumers about opportunities to improve and preserve their health. Traditionally, preventive healthcare information dissemination relied heavily on face-to-face interactions with healthcare providers and printed materials. However, with the rise of the internet and social media, individuals increasingly turn to online sources for health-related information (Cangelosi et al, 2021). Online health information offers opportunities such as increased interaction with others navigating similar illnesses and greater access to health information otherwise only available via medical practitioner, but also drawbacks such as information quality concerns and risks associated with sharing personal information online (Moorhead et al., 2013). Overall, research concerning online health information evidences an ongoing rise in consumer use of the internet to access health information (Cangelosi, Ranelli, and

Kim, 2012; Huang, Chang, and Khurana, 2012; Seçkin, 2014).

What social media and networks are best for disseminating PHCI?

Marketing communication practitioners are charged with developing and sustaining a voice in the spaces where consumers are engaged. For health care marketing communication professionals working to inform, remind, and persuade consumers on preventive health care matters, this requires an understanding of which platforms consumers – and specific subsets of consumers – use for the acquisition of PHCI. An analysis of questionnaire responses collected from 800 U.S. adults in 2019 (Cangelosi et al., 2021) revealed several useful insights concerning the importance of YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (now “X”), including the following:

- YouTube is an especially useful tool for sharing PHCI. Overall, YouTube was considered an important source for PHCI among more than half of respondents, while the other popular platforms were generally dismissed as unimportant or unfamiliar sources. This finding aligned with prior research noting YouTube’s emergence as a popular educational and informational tool for patients and healthcare providers (Tolu et al., 2018), as many consumers prefer YouTube as opposed to written sources of health information (Esen et al., 2019). Further explanation of the finding may hinge on YouTube’s longstanding position as the most used social media site among U.S. adults (Gottfried, 2024) and consumer preference for cue-rich video and its capacity to clearly communicate sometimes complicated information.

- Compared to older consumers, younger consumers find social media and networks more important for gathering PHCI. For all social media and networks (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) included in the study, the younger the age class or age cohort, the more important the platform was for gathering PHCI. While importance of each platform varied by other demographic variables, those identifying as “single, never married” found

the sites most important in acquiring PHCI when compared to their widowed, separated/divorced, partnered/cohabitating, and married counterparts. These age and marital status findings align with prior research (Cangelosi et al., 2019) finding these younger, single consumers, who are more likely than other groups to be “digital natives”, assign greater importance digital channels for accessing PHCI. Additionally, this finding mirrors U.S. social media usage trends, as younger Americans are overall more likely to use social media (Gottfried, 2024). This is not to say marketing communication professionals should use social media and networks solely for campaigns centered on issues affecting younger consumers. Social networks – whether online or in person – are designed to transmit word-of-mouth information between users who are connected via any number of relationships. Further, marketing communication professionals should consider the number of young consumers who care for aging parents (Parker & Patten, 2013) and, accordingly, have the capacity to inform, remind, and persuade older consumers concerning preventive health care.

What type of communication do consumers prefer for receiving PHCI?

In the healthcare setting, dialogic, two-way communication between doctors and patients both ensures the best patient care (Ha & Longnecker, 2010) and satisfies the patient’s preference for a psychosocial model of communication fostering a feeling of partnership and support (Roter et al., 1997). However, physicians tend to rely on provider-controlled biomedical communication (Roter et al., 1997).

In the promotions toolkit, marketing communication professionals have long enjoyed access to one-way (traditional) media like brochures and advertisements, which allow a source to send information but offer no pathway for questions and clarifications. In comparison, social media and networks (new media) provide a promotional tool offering two-way communication and, therefore, opportunity to pursue conversation about the matter with both the source and other users. This begs the

question: In the digital space (as compared to face-to-face), how do consumers prefer to receive PHCI?

Via the aforementioned analysis of questionnaire responses collected from 800 U.S. adults in 2019 (Cangelosi et al., 2021), we asked consumers whether they prefer (A) one-way communication in which you type in keywords and get web links or information about the health care topic you are interested in or (B) two-way communication that is interactive in the sense that you can ask questions, offer content, and expect a response. The following insights should inform communication strategy:

- Overall, patients prefer two-way communication in the digital space. The majority of respondents (62.7%) indicated this preference. This mirrors patients' in-office preferences for two-way communication, which ensures the best patient care (Ha & Longnecker, 2010) and increases patient involvement in their own care (Lee & Garvin, 2003). Accordingly, PHCI campaigns should work to create two-way communication on social media and networks through, for example, provision of timely responses to comments on page posts and live videos in which questions are enabled and encouraged.
- Insured consumers of higher education and income levels are most interested in two-way, interactive communication in PHCI delivery. With greater education, many consumers enjoy better jobs and, therefore, higher income levels and other benefits such as health insurance (Lee, 2015). These consumers possess greater levels of health literacy (Coughlin et al., 2020), meaning they have stronger capacity to gather, interpret, and comprehend health information and services, along with the competence required to use the information to enhance their health (USDHHS, 2000). In comparison, patients with lower levels of health literacy ask fewer questions when engaging with caregivers and appear to lack confidence in their ability to participate in decision-making (Ishikawa et al., 2009). Recognizing social media and networks are uniquely positioned to reach less educated, lower income, and uninsured consumers (Grover et al., 2018), marketing communication

professionals should consider carefully how to create ease for consumers who may not be as comfortable with two-way communication about PHCI.

Peers or providers: Who do consumers trust for PHCI?

Social media and networks offer consumers access to PHCI from content creators of varied levels and sources of expertise. The credibility a user assigns to a source – be it a licensed caregiver or a friend who has endured a specific health issue – determines the degree to which she will accept information. Based on expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland et al., 1953), credibility is a matter of perception formed independent of accuracy (Hocevar et al., 2017). This means users can incorrectly assign credibility (Hocevar et al., 2017). When determining the expertise of a source, users can assign “expert” status to a source based on credentials or experience (Eysenbach et al., 2002; Eysenbach, 2008). The peer-to-peer engagement on health matters made available in digital media enables a user to connect with other users who share their health issue, learning about others' health experience (“The Internet and Health”, 2013). While expertise is important, there is evidence trustworthiness of the source – which is a matter of individual perception and may be earned through communication and education – has greater bearing on source credibility (Hocevar et al., 2017). With this information in mind, marketing communication professionals take on the task of selecting the most effective message source for a particular PHCI initiative.

Via the aforementioned 2019 study, we learned:

1. Generally, consumers trust medical professionals more than peers when looking for PHCI about a medical issue. This reflects demonstrated consumer awareness that peer-sourced information on social media has the potential to mislead or may be less trustworthy (Pant et al., 2012).
2. However, Millennials do trust peers slightly more than medical professionals when

seeking out PHCI related to a medical issue. Further, a linear relationship exists whereby the younger the consumer, the greater the trust in peers compared to medical professionals. As digital natives, it is possible these consumers – who are extremely comfortable with digital media – prioritize ease of access over trustworthiness or credibility when seeking health information (Johnson, 2014). Additionally, evidence suggests these young consumers encounter difficulty when finding, assessing, and using online health information (Gray et al., 2005) and prioritize similarity of peers over perceived experience when evaluating resources (Paek, al., 2011). Accordingly, marketing communication professionals targeting younger consumers are encouraged to not only consider the role of similarity of

source (the source is like me) in effective communication, but also to prioritize accessibility (easy to find) and digestibility (easy to understand and act upon).

Conclusion

Social media presents a powerful opportunity to revolutionize the dissemination of preventive healthcare information. By understanding consumer preferences for platforms like YouTube, adopting two-way communication models, and selecting message sources tailored to specific groups, marketing communication professionals can effectively leverage social media to inform, remind, and persuade consumers concerning preventive health care.

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