HOW SOCIALLY HEALTHY IS THE AMERICAN HEALTHCARE SECTOR?

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Digital consumerization via social media

Social media which initially started out as a tool for people to keep in touch with their acquaintances has today transformed into a business platform that's the newest member of the corporate mix. Given the huge uptake of social media amongst a growing number of people, this is a natural outcome of how economics dictates the ebb and flow of market dynamics. Where there are prospects, there will always be marketers and where there are consumers, there is a need for support and enhancement. This marketplace attracts not only competitors but industry analysts as well, who then predict and influence the consumer behavior. With the advent of social media services specifically catering to the needs of businesses, like Facebook pages and promoted tweets, organizations today have a far more convenient and compelling reason to engage with their consumers and potential fans on social platforms.

Social media and mobility have changed consumer behavior more in the last five years when compared to the last two decades. Consumers have more channels and forums today to not only discover, but share, contribute and influence via their social persona. Consumers today are better informed and more prone to consulting with their peers before making purchase decisions. As a result, social media has become a very important tool to influence consumer sentiments about brands and products.

Empowered consumer

Consumer behavior is undergoing a paradigm shift with the arrival of social media. No longer is the consumer an obscure faceless voice identified by a series of numbers logged into the complaint book. Today, the consumer can drastically influence how his peers view brands, organizations and other individuals. The power of social media lies in the fact that it provides common people who were otherwise powerless to voice their opinion, a radically new way of making themselves heard. Take the now famous story of Hasan Syed, who used Twitter's promoted tweets, to get British Airways (BA) to acknowledge his complaint about lost baggage. His traditional approach was probably not handled well and as a result, negative perceptions about BA's baggage handling capabilities have now gone viral.

Customer service is becoming an increasingly critical component of social media engagements. Organizations that fail to respond to this critical customer need will start facing negative consequences like eroding brand credibility and loss of customer confidence, both highly critical aspects of competing in an increasingly homogeneous marketplace. Peer referencing and recommendations are considered very important in the social space and ideas like Hasan's can make or break a product's credibility in a very short period of time. Social influencers are becoming a vital component of how brands build marketing strategies in the social space.

This is nowhere truer than the healthcare sector where the patient-doctor relationships are now spilling over to the social space. A study shows that 35% of the physicians have received friend requests from patients and patient family members. Added to this is the fact that insurers too are being increasingly engaged by clients in the social space for service enquiries and issue resolution, thus making it all the more critical for the healthcare sector to start taking social media management much more seriously.

Is it really relevant for healthcare?

For consumers and end users of healthcare services, social adoption to further their health related engagements is a no brainer. It's highly convenient, emotionally appealing, offers them the ability to select their choices more socially, and it's just an extension of something they have already been using for some time. It's no wonder then that consumers are increasingly adopting the social platform to reach out to service providers and insurers to deal with a variety of issues ranging from request for information to getting their complaints and grievances addressed by the concerned stakeholder.

With the recent developments and introduction of the Affordable Care Act, even more people are joining the trend and using social platforms to discuss about the implications of the Act. Not all companies are reacting the same way and consumers are voicing their opinions and

fears about impending exit of many large health plans from states like California. Our analysis indicates that a large number of social conversations in the recent past have centered around the various aspects of the Act, with key discussions touching upon understanding the Act itself, followed by how it would affect coverage and policy purchases. Many social users seem to be of the opinion that the exchanges will lower insurance premiums, which seems to be influencing customer perception and expectations.

There is an opportunity for healthcare consumers to shop for selective services through more sophisticated e-neighborhood sites as the healthcare industry achieves a higher degree of data transparency, especially around cost and outcomes. As the industry becomes more competitive, a well-constructed engagement strategy using social media technology will become a part of a health plan business model.
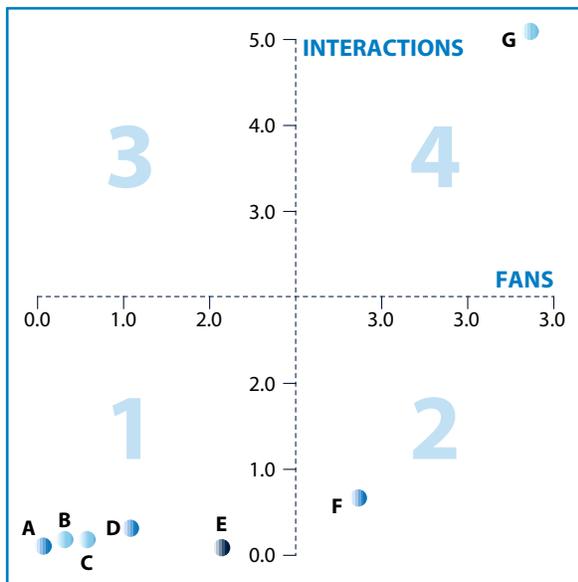
What does the doctor have to say?

A recent survey of over 4000 physicians reported that 87 % use social media for personal use but more importantly, over 67% use social media for professional purposes. Providers have adopted social strategies quite willingly and seem to be, along with consumers, the driving force behind the increasing prevalence of socially focused consumer engagement strategies that are becoming more prevalent in the industry.

How health plans are embracing social media

As opposed to providers and consumers, the insurers still have some way to go in terms of leveraging social media to build engagements with other stakeholders and utilize its extensive data generation opportunities. These organizations are presently focusing more on traditional mediums than on emerging platforms like digital (specifically social) and mobile applications. As a result, very few organizations that we surveyed in this preliminary study have actually managed to use social media to any degree of 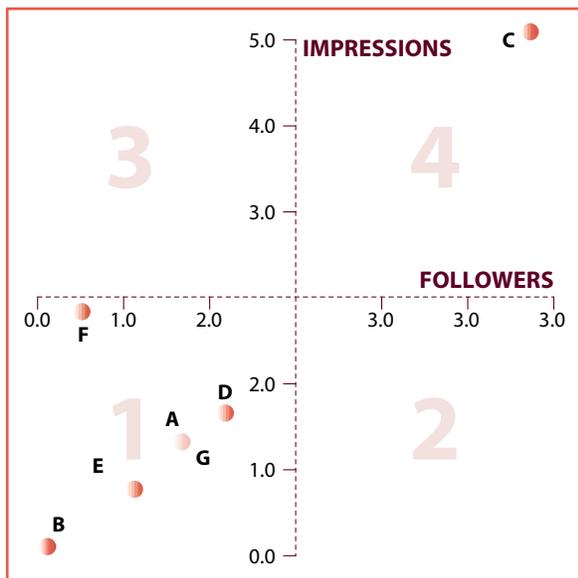effectiveness and those that have, still have some way to go before they can call themselves "mature" in the social space. We performed a social analysis of seven of the leading healthcare insurers in America and found that almost all of them apart from one or two, have yet to reach out to their consumers and support networks with conviction.

Facebook chart

	INTERACTIONS	G
5.0		
4.0		
3		4
3.0		
		FANS
0.0 1.0 2.0	3.0 3.0 3.0	
2.0		
1		2
1.0		
	F	
A B D	E	
0.0		
C		

Analysis of Facebook presence of seven leading healthcare insurers in America

Interactions: An average of the sum of likes, shares and comments received

1. Companies in this quadrant are sparsely utilizing social media.

2. Companies in this quadrant are just beginning to leverage social more.

3. Companies in quadrant 3 have a reasonably good social strategy.

4. The most social mature organizations are listed in quadrant 4.

Twitter chart

5.0	IMPRESSIONS	C
4.0		
3		4
3.0		
		FOLLOWERS
0.0 1.0 2.0	3.0 3.0 3.0	
F		
	D 2.0	
	A	2
E	G 1.0	
B		
	0.0	

Analysis of Twitter presence of seven leading Healthcare insurers in America

Impressions: The total number of times the tweets were delivered to user timelines

1. Companies in this quadrant are sparsely utilizing social media.

2. Companies in this quadrant are just beginning to leverage social more.

3. Companies in quadrant 3 have a reasonably good social strategy.

4. The most social mature organizations are listed in quadrant 4.

As can be seen from the analysis, there is neither any consistency across platforms, nor any significant presence in the most socially mature quadrant (quadrant 4).

The bigger threat for most insurers here is that there are one or two organizations that have already moved into a social leadership position and there's no one else remotely close to them. This should worry all those who are yet to formulate any coherent social strategy since it provides the early movers a significant advantage over late bloomers. The socially mature organizations are already influencing consumer opinions and building a strong foundation with diverse service providers. They could well leave no room for anyone else in the social space in the coming years if this gap between those who are yet to leverage social seriously and themselves increases.

There are many opportunities for the healthcare industry here. Insurers have been presented with an opportunity to freshly address new markets where established players are no longer keen to

ply their trade. A key lacuna seems to be an exact knowledge related to calculating how the rules of the Act will specifically apply to coverage and premium. The social platform is ideal to build this kind

of an engagement model by using simple applications that can used to inform and educate the insured about how the Act will impact their personal insurance plans.

Going forward

The big question that everyone is trying to answer is: what will be the role of social media in the near future? Social has been leveraged for both successful execution and its ability to drive business results like "Breaking Bad's'" finale closing series driving tune in's to the other spectrum of questionable impact of large campaigns of BestBuy and Pepsi. While these two were able to create a lot buzz and recognition, it did not tie into the larger business of driving consumption. Social is the newest and increasingly, a very crucial channel to build genuine connect and showcase product merit. With all its pros and cons, it's now time to embrace the technology
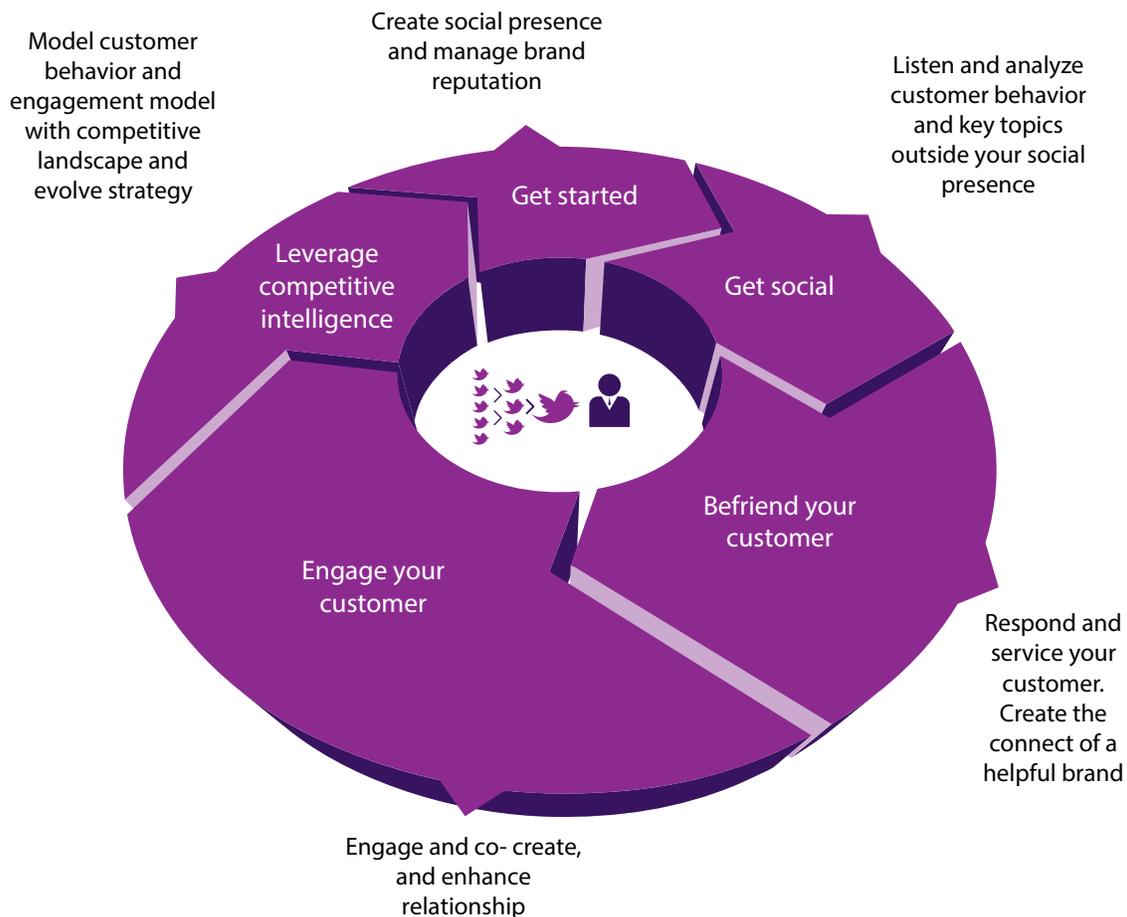
and bring the solution to the forefront of Healthcare in the US. Consumers are "owning their health and participating in ownership of their well-being" and will require healthcare stakeholders to not only address information needs but also help support the business of "healthcare care". Another aspect to the entire perspective is the presence of the HIPAA, which dictates how privacy and information confidentiality is to be managed between the various stakeholders in the healthcare industry. A great opportunity exists to build social platforms that conform to HIPAA stipulations where patients, providers and insurers can all benefit

from each other. For patients, such forums offer an opportunity to access cheaper healthcare expertise besides having direct interactions with subject matter experts on issues that concern them. For providers, this is wonderful chance to showcase their skills while growing their practices and providing an essential service to a wider community. From the insurer's perspective, such communities can offer a chance to understand consumer preferences, generate leads and in the process, build more meaningful relationships with their support network.

How can social media be adopted and used?

A robust social strategy is needed by those who still haven't adopted it. Competitors are already reaching out to stakeholders in the social space; nobody can afford to be left behind.

Model customer behavior and engagement model with competitive landscape and evolve strategy

Create social presence and manage brand reputation

Listen and analyze customer behavior and key topics outside your social presence

Get started

Leverage competitive intelligence

Get social

Befriend your customer

Engage your customer

Respond and service your customer. Create the connect of a helpful brand

Engage and co- create, and enhance relationship

- **Get started:** The first step towards building a good social strategy is to identify the target audience and the platforms frequented by them. This is a critical step because it determines everything that comes later. Once these are short listed, create your social profiles and start sharing relevant corporate / industry updates to establish your social credentials.

- **Get social:** Understand your larger ecosystem and the key target consumer conversations and their emotions regarding these topics. Create a consumer model to plan your strategy for the next steps. Additionally, identify key trends and how your brand relates

to them, while getting your social positioning in place.

- **Befriend your customer:** Start engaging with consumers in conversation, not only on your social properties but on other key properties and create your socially approachable persona.

- **Engage with your customer:** Expand your relationship with your consumers and key influencer groups to create a longer relationship to drive co-creation and sustainable engagement. Collect and profile your consumers' needs to understand and service their requirements.

- **Leverage competitive intelligence:** Expand your scope of analysis beyond your own brand to include your competitors to understand your industry and improve your existing customer servicing model. Use this intelligence to enhance and expand your social strategy to evolve and meet the new customer's needs.

Getting your motto and reason defined for social is the most important step. Stay away from being distracted by irrelevant metrics which do not relate to your business. Focus on what is right for your business; if social adds to it and it benefits your consumers', then it will pay for itself.

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Ajay is the Practice Lead for Social Media practice at Infosys BPO. He leads the global practice for solutions design and delivery of social media operations. In his role, he is responsible for designing the offering and setting up and operationalizing the Social Media Command Center for customers. He is also the technology domain expert on Customer Service practice and helps in transformation projects using technology and has anchored technology led differentiation (TLD) for the practice.

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