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Companies, Hospital CEOs Connect with Audiences by Blogging

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Weblogs, also known as blogs, are an Internet phenomenon originally associated with online diaries and pop culture sites. Today, they're finding their way into corporate marketing strategies. Companies are using blogs to connect with customers, put a personal face on a seemingly impersonal business, and receive feedback about products and strategy.

Healthcare is behind and is missing an opportunity, says Bill Crouse MD, global healthcare industry director for the Redmond, Wash. based Microsoft Corporation.

Blogs Provide a Platform

Crouse writes two blogs about healthcare information technology. One for technical readers is at <http://blogs.msdn.com/healthblog/> and his more general one is at <http://on10.net/blogs/bcrouse/>. Recent topics include the use of mobile clinical assistants and how Microsoft's Vista operating system can be paired with its SharePoint server for healthcare solutions.

Crouse says the blogs give him a platform for connecting with decision makers. "How do you connect with an audience? How can you be a champion and an evangelist for technology? Blogs are a great way to reach the narrow constituency of healthcare professionals interested in technology and how it can improve healthcare delivery and patient safety. It's a way to have a conversation."

Blogs Build Strong Customer Relationships

Carol Kirshner, vice president of nursing continuing education company The Promedica Research Center of Loganville, Ga. agrees. "It's about listening to your customers, finding out what they want, and responding. Even if you can't incorporate what they want, you can at least show them that you're listening. It's a way of building a strong, robust customer relationship."

Kirshner authors the Driving in Traffic blog (<http://www.drivingintraffics.com>) and champions the use of blogging and other social media tools to market healthcare products and services. For the past two years, she has helped individual physicians develop blog strategies for their practices.

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"Healthcare is an extensively personal service industry," says Kirshner. "People don't relish going to a healthcare provider or facility that treats them like a number. They want to be treated like a person. Creating an online persona, if you will, with a blog can help people ascertain if they are going to find the kind of treatment they are looking for in your organization."

Kirshner believes blogging has broader uses, too. "You can use blogging to target your employees, as a way of refining your processes, or introducing new company initiatives," says Kirshner. "Blogging allows you to build a loyal base because the technology allows 24/7 access to your organization."

Hospital CEO's Blog Encourages Transparency

Kirshner cites Windberblog (<http://windberblog.typepad.com>), the blog of F. Nicholas Jacobs, president and CEO of the Windber Medical Center and Research Institute in Windber, Pa., as one of the best healthcare blogs.

"Jacobs really believes in transparency of healthcare and puts it out there with his blog," says Kirshner. "It's one of the best examples of how blogs can build a trusting relationship with customers and the community."

Jacobs mixes the personal and the professional in the Windberblog, also known as Nick's Blog. He has posted pieces about why his hospital tries to perform fewer invasive surgeries alongside those featuring his own poetry.

Michael Russell, consulting principal of The Russell Organization and Windber's webmaster, says that linking the hospital's site to Jacobs' blog was a risk worth taking, even though it's uncommon to mix business and personal sites. "We felt strongly that the blog, and especially the multimedia content on it, was the ideal way for him to get his innovative ideas out to patients, professional peers, and the press."

"This has been the best year financially for the hospital in 101 years and I attribute some of that to my blog," says Jacobs. "I think more people know about us and know who we are by reading it and it's really helping us."

Jacobs believes that the most successful blogs maintain an element of the personal. "It's tempting to turn it over to a PR department. But then, it just becomes the annual report and, let's face it, the annual report is boring."

-- Correspondent Kayt Sukel