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Social Media and Community Health: Leveraging Online Tools for Healthier Communities

Roundtable Discussion Summary Report

April 2009

Social Media and Community Health – Roundtable Discussion

Introduction. On March 18, 2009, 43 participants from 17 organizations representing government, business, and non-profit sectors convened in Omaha, Nebraska for a *Roundtable Discussion on Social Media and Community Health*. The meeting was sponsored by the [Center for Health Transformation](#) (CHT) and [Booz Allen Hamilton](#) (Booz Allen), following-on previous work exploring new cross-sector approaches to combating Type II diabetes. The roundtable discussion provided an opportunity for the diverse group of healthcare professionals present to review well-known social media tools currently available in the marketplace and discuss the potential utility of each in furthering health and wellness promotion initiatives in communities around the country.

Background. In early 2008 a Booz Allen team, sponsored by Novo Nordisk, conducted a diabetes stakeholder analysis, interviewing 34 thought leaders from 22 organizations to gather a sample of insights and overlapping priority areas across organizations working to fight diabetes. Following this stakeholder analysis, Booz Allen and CHT hosted a [Diabetes Thought Leader Roundtable Discussion](#) in October 2008, inviting stakeholder interviewees and others to review the findings of the Stakeholder Analysis and identify priority action areas with the greatest overlap among key stakeholders. Two of the priority areas identified during the October roundtable focus on the need to affect the broader environmental context in order to influence individual behaviors towards healthier living habits and, ultimately, improved health and wellness:

- ▶ *Individual behavior is greatly shaped by community planning and cultural norms – we need to work to change the environmental context to facilitate changes in individual behaviors. Our behaviors are largely shaped as a result of our environment, community, and social norms. These are, in turn, shaped by the media, legislation, community leaders, and public awareness campaigns, among other elements. Shifting the environmental context in favor of healthier lifestyles can have wide-spread impact across entire communities.*
- ▶ *To strengthen environmental and “community” enhancements for diabetes prevention, we need to reach people at the locations where they congregate: work, schools, religious communities, and, increasingly, online. To make it easier for the population to access accurate information which reinforces positive living habits, working with employers, schools and colleges, religious institutions, and social networking sites can help to more efficiently target messaging.*

Following on the consensus generated at the October roundtable around the two priority areas described above, CHT and Booz Allen organized the *Social Media and Community Health Roundtable* in Omaha to further examine the potential of social media tools to facilitate rapid and comprehensive access to information on health and wellness, and to influence media, legislation, social norms, and, ultimately, national health behaviors.

Objectives. The Omaha roundtable discussion had three principle objectives:

- ▶ Explore a variety of online social media tools, including their principal advantages and limitations
- ▶ Share success stories and lessons learned from community health initiatives currently utilizing social media tools to support program goals
- ▶ Identify key opportunities, challenges, and areas for improvement in the use of online social media tools to successfully support community health promotion initiatives

Approach. Former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, kicked off the March 18th discussion in Omaha by identifying three significant trends, which present opportunities for innovation and expanded use of social media tools to promote health and wellness in the U.S. while also preventing Type II diabetes:

1. *Focus on Health rather than Healthcare:* Increasingly in the U.S., medical professionals, public officials, and citizens are recognizing that the health challenges facing our nation today are so great that they are badly straining our healthcare system. Consensus is forming around the need to put greater emphasis on promoting health and wellness to diminish the cost of illness and disease treatment. To achieve improved health of our nation as a whole, it is critical that we address not only individuals, but entire communities and the environmental context within which individuals make daily choices that impact their overall health and wellness.
2. *Rapid advances in technology and increased use of social media tools:* New technologies are being developed and adopted at increasingly rapid rates across industries and around the world. Technologies that we take for granted today, such as ATMs and cellular phones, were not readily accessible to the population as a whole just 15 years ago. Internet and social media use continues to explode today with 246 million Americans (73% of the population) using the internet in 2008,¹ up from 108 million in 2000. Popular social media applications have experienced rapid adoption rates, with 175 million current users of Facebook world wide, over 100 million MySpace users, and 39 million users of LinkedIn. Use of social media tools for health-related goals is also significant, with Manhattan Research reporting current use of [Health 2.0 social media tools](#) (e.g., health blogs, online support groups, prescription rating sites, and other health-related social media applications) at over 60 million Americans in 2008.²
3. *Growing body of well-documented, community-based health program best practices:* Along with the trend towards greater adoption of technology, and the ease of communications and tracking of program impact that it enables, there is a growing body of [well-documented examples](#) of successful community health programs that have a proven impact on improving the health of communities across the U.S. It is time to leverage and replicate these best practices across the country to improve the overall health of Americans and reduce unnecessary healthcare spending.

Following Speaker Gingrich's introduction to the roundtable discussion, Booz Allen presented an overview of some of the most popular and well-known social media tools (e.g., [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), [Wikipedia](#), [Twitter](#)) and specific examples of social media tools currently being used by community leaders, non-profit organizations, physicians, consumers, and government to improve health and wellness and enable improved communication and knowledge sharing in the healthcare system.

Next, Ms. Kerri Peterson of [Live Well Omaha](#) (formerly [Our Healthy Community Partnership](#)) presented an overview of her organization's history and successful community-based programs in Omaha. *Live Well Omaha* is an initiative developed by several organizations from the private, non-profit and local government sectors in the Omaha area, with a mission of "improving community health through a forum of organizations positively impacting health outcomes for all individuals and families." Ms. Peterson shared *Live Well Omaha's* experience mobilizing community members towards improved exercise habits through it's *Activate Omaha* program, using media publicity and it's web site to engage the community and track metrics.

Following the presentations by Booz Allen and *Live Well Omaha*, participants engaged in dialogue regarding success stories, challenges, and future opportunities in the use of social media tools to

1 [Internet World Stats](#), Miniwatts Marketing Group. Accessed: 26 March, 2009. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

2 "Over 60 Million U.S. Adults Engaging in Health 2.0." [Manhattan Research](#). Published: 3 November, 2008.

http://www.manhattanresearch.com/newsroom/Press_Releases/over-60-million-health-20-consumers.aspx

improve health and healthcare across the U.S. The conversation covered both health promotion and wellness, as well as how physicians, hospitals, and insurance companies can use social media tools to improve communication with their patients before, during, and after treatment.

Insights. Over the course of the discussion participants identified several key opportunities and challenges with regard to the use of social media tools to improve community health and wellness:

Opportunities

Social media can provide a low cost, highly targeted, and highly engaging means of increasing awareness of community health initiatives. Organizations from private companies to governments are taking greater advantage of social media that have grown exponentially in popularity over the last decade. By supplementing traditional communications strategies with social media, organizations have discovered the power of word of mouth marketing. An example of this is the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) recent efforts to raise awareness about [tainted peanut butter](#), some of which was contaminated with salmonella. The FDA successfully used Twitter and other social media applications to generate buzz about the news and spread word of the tainted peanut butter quickly and at a low cost.

Social media can be used to reach and engage a younger audience through the sites and communities where they already congregate online. Live Well Omaha's "[Activate Omaha Kids](#)" is considering using social media to engage youth, already congregating online, in collaborative challenges to lose weight and exercise more. Social media experts recommend identifying locations where target groups currently congregate online and developing strategies to generate excitement in these locations rather than trying to create new online communities and draw the target audience to them.

Social media can be used to build trust and engage customers in a relationship with an organization or business rather than simply pushing out messages. Several organizations have already begun using social networking sites (public or proprietary), discussion boards and forums, and other tools to offer target clients/populations a place to meet others with similar interests and discuss issues of importance to them. A traditional website may do a good job of connecting people to information, but through the use of social media, that site can also connect people to other people like them. Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA) offers a [social networking platform](#) for patients with cancer to create a profile and engage in discussions and relationships online with other patients. The offering has gained in popularity, with 275,000 unique visitors per month currently, and is a great way for CTCA to build their brand and a unique grassroots relationship with their customers.

Social media can help promote patient-centered medicine by empowering patients to do their own background research. As increased attention is given to putting the patient back at the center of health care in the U.S., social media tools online provide patients with efficient new ways to filter through the enormous amount of health-related information available on the internet. Patients can receive updated news related to their health area of interest through RSS news feeds, they can join chat rooms or social networking sites to discuss questions with others going through the same kinds of issues, they can choose their doctor based on online reviews from other patients. As the volume of information available online increases, the utility of social media continues to gain in value.

Challenges

Information and communications overload. Participants noted that, while social media tools have the potential to empower the general public to find more information and become more knowledgeable about their health, they can also threaten to discourage the public from seeking out information due to the overwhelming quantity of information available online. Organizations need to understand how to best use social media as part of their communications and customer engagement strategy to achieve the right balance of communications with their customers or target audience.

Niche Audiences. Social media is not a panacea. It does not work in all situations, nor is it meant to replace current communications initiatives. Several participants noted the utility of social media tools for those who are currently heavy users of the internet, however many of the population segments targeted for improved health and wellness are some of the poorest and most underserved populations in the country. These populations are also much less likely to own a computer or be a heavy user of the internet and social media tools. Business, government, and non-profit organizations need to be cognizant that social media may or may not be the most effective way to engage their given target audience. This makes it critical that an organization properly identify their goals and their audiences before engaging with any social media. In many cases, you may be able to use social media to indirectly impact your audience too. For example, one could use social media to engage directly to reach key personalities or leaders of other popular media sources (e.g., television, newspapers). By using Twitter or blogs, for example, to post information on interesting programs implemented by non-profits, local news reporters may pick up on these stories and decide to write an article or cover a story on television, which will ultimately be seen by the target population.

Speaker Gingrich concluded the roundtable discussion with a call to the participants to continue exploring new technologies, including social media, to improve their programs and outreach to patients and the population as a whole. He suggested that through the use of current technologies, and the development of new technologies, healthcare can continue to improve while keeping costs under control.

Next Steps.

In follow up to this first Social Media and Community Health roundtable discussion, in the coming months CHT and Booz Allen will co-host additional roundtable discussions to continue researching and collecting best practice examples of the use of social media to promote health and wellness. After documenting further examples of best practices and success stories, and identifying gaps that current social media tools can not meet, Booz Allen and CHT plan to co-host a meeting in Silicon Valley with social media experts to further brainstorm on how these tools can help promote healthy living in the U.S. More information on next steps will be forthcoming from CHT and Booz Allen.

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