Insights on Consumerism: Why Online Reviews Are Contagious

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Over the past three years, physician online reviews have shifted from a novelty among a few systems to a strategy in most major health care markets. Despite this prevalence, the idea of online reviews causes anxiety for many health systems and physicians. It can be disconcerting to imagine what patients think when they read both positive and negative comments on a provider’s own Web page. Will negative information erode confidence? Why isn’t the information that is shared on a physician profile Web page enough?

While physicians and health systems debate whether or not to post reviews, U.S. consumers have made up their minds. They have decided that patient reviews—particularly the comments—are absolutely valuable. In recent studies, most consumers report finding online reviews a reliable source of information. With respect to health care specifically, most report researching a physician online, even after a physician referral. This high level of consumer confidence is predictable, once you understand the significance of word of mouth.

In his national bestseller, Contagious, Wharton professor Jonah Berger describes the science behind word of mouth. The opinions and experiences of others have a dominant impact on purchasing decisions. For many in health care, this feels counterintuitive: Physicians wonder why consumers would be swayed by patient stories over discerning expert referral. Berger’s research identifies four forces to explain this behavior.

1. People love stories. People love telling and listening to stories. Every day we share our experiences of vacations, purchases, movies, books, recipes and services from dry cleaning to day care. We talk to family, friends, co-workers, neighbors and even strangers about our experiences. Social media has expanded that forum exponentially. We share our opinions on Facebook, blogs and Twitter. Our opinions are a manifestation of our personalities, expertise and influence as consumers.

2. Word of mouth is powerful. Not only is word of mouth ubiquitous, it’s tremendously influential. We seek the opinions of others. We want to know what they know. Berger’s research reveals that word of mouth is the primary factor behind 20% to 50% of all purchasing decisions. More startling is the fact that despite the value of traditional advertising, word of mouth is 10 times more effective in driving consumer choice.

3. Word of mouth is trustworthy. The best traditional advertising is grounded in a deep understanding of consumer problems paired with clear statements about how a product provides the best possible solution to that problem. Every ad promotes its product’s superiority: best quality, best price, best convenience, and so forth. And it is just because everyone claims to be the best that consumers find the claims lack credibility. Consumers want to know how it really is. We know that everything can’t be the best, and we trust word of mouth to describe what to really expect. This candor generates real trust.

4. Word of mouth is specific. Because traditional advertising is expensive to produce, messages are generalized to attract the average consumer. The focus is on reaching the largest audience possible. This is especially noticeable in health care advertising, which tends to focus on the universal appeal of quality, caring and, increasingly, convenience. Driving through any major metropolitan area you’ll see billboard after billboard touting quality awards, caring providers and short wait times—often the only real difference between them being the brand name. Word of mouth
is specific, especially in health care. We share our orthopedic surgery experience with athletes, tell friends with kids about our wonderful pediatrician. Specificity is the most powerful force with patient reviews. Many of us don’t have friends or family who share our diagnosis, but through online reviews, we can instantly connect with the most specific group: people who share our symptoms and have received care from a specific physician.

The Virtual Waiting Room

Based on these considerations, it is not surprising that online reviews—the new word of mouth—have such appeal to consumers. Physicians, on the other hand, view online reviews with natural fear and trepidation, imagining polarizing commentary like they read in reviews of hotels and restaurants. To abate these fears, they should think about online reviews that are based on valid sample sizes (health systems that host reviews on their own websites typically rely on established parameters for statistical validity) as a virtual waiting room.

What if your next new patient had the chance to sit in your waiting room, talking to 30 or more of your current patients? What would they learn about your skill, your personality, your team and the outcomes your patients achieve?

Considering online reviews in this way can help physicians understand how digital word of mouth helps patients feel empowered to make important health care decisions. It should also contribute to their own sense of empowerment, knowing that the information being shared is fueled by their own efforts to provide a great patient experience by being compassionate, being empathetic and delivering great care.