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Where the Doctors Are:

Online Physician Networking

Executive Summary

Online physician networking

Social networking is exploding. This June, Facebook.com had 132,105,000 unique visitors worldwide, a 153% jump from 2007, according to comScore. In total, social networks had 580,510,000 unique visitors worldwide in June. That's up 25% from June 2007, compared to an 11% increase in the total Internet audience. This online networking trend is also taking hold among physicians, who are a willing and receptive audience for the phenomenon. In fact, they are the ultimate collaborators and networkers.

Physicians are an ideal audience for social networking because they have strong connections that they've established throughout their careers, says **Steve Zatz**, executive vice president of professional services at WebMD, who oversees Medscape Physician Connect. They're connected on a variety of levels, such as medical school, residency, specialty, professional organizations, and hospital affiliations. All those connections make social networking meaningful to physicians, Zatz says.

Yet deep connections aren't the only catalyst for making online relationships among doctors.

"Physicians are, in fact, quite lonely," says **Daniel Palestrant**, founder and CEO of Sermo, adding that they often practice in isolation and miss the camaraderie they had in medical school or residency. Also, as medicine becomes more outpatient-focused and time-pressured,

the opportunities for physicians to have face-to-face discussions with colleagues are eroding.

Among physicians, there are two types of social networking: personal and professional. On the personal side, there are sites such as Facebook, where physicians can connect with friends. On the professional side, physicians connect with colleagues for clinical, rather than social, discussions. Although the physician population is relatively large on personal social networking sites, pharma companies wishing to engage with physicians are better off sticking to professional sites, says **Meredith Abreu Ressi**, vice president of research at Manhattan Research.

"There are some interesting promotional and awareness opportunities for pharma on sites like Facebook," says Abreu Ressi. "But although there are physician groups on Facebook, I would say that the site is more relevant for consumer or patient audiences."

Sites such as Sermo and Medscape assure members that they are in a closed community of their peers, which is important to physicians, Abreu Ressi says. On professional sites, questions and responses come from fellow physicians, rather than marketers or consumers.

Physicians can also interact without worrying about whether their responses will be scrutinized by the general public. However, other

nonprofessional networking sites can be a good indicator of physicians' online usage, willingness to interact, and comfort level with Web features in general. 📌

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Thinking outside the banner ad

"Pharma companies need to think about expanding their marketing programs," says **Michelle Snyder**, vice president of marketing and subscription sales at Epocrates. Social networks allow pharma companies to observe and engage physicians in new ways. At the same time, old models are becoming less effective.

These new ways of interacting include a departure from relying on advertising. Physicians want a place where they can have deep clinical discussions with their peers. Physician-only communities provide a secure,

exclusive environment, while still allowing pharma to play a role.

Listening in on these conversations is a great way for pharma to have an "ear to the ground," Abreu Ressi says, adding that pharma can use these conversations to "identify and anticipate changes in physician opinion or experiences with a treatment at a much earlier stage than was typically possible." This includes off-label uses, new side effects, or a clinical trial. In addition to listening in on conversations, pharma companies also have the chance to influence online opinion leaders.



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