Portal to Better Physician Relationships

If you’re going to do a physician portal, do it right!

By Dan Ansel

**Strengthening** physician-hospital alignment is one of the highest priorities for healthcare organizations. Finding ways to create persistent and ongoing communication between the hospital and physicians is one of the most important things to do as part of any hospital-physician relationship strategy.

Building, maintaining and enhancing relationships between the hospital and physicians takes strong support from the top, an organized strategy and a comprehensive communication plan to be successful. One key part of that plan is an e-strategy as physicians, especially younger physicians, continue to increase their use of Internet-based communication tools.

When Private Health News, a Cincinnati-based e-communication company, asked its clients to assess their current hospital-physician relations activities and, in particular, their thoughts regarding e-communications, a remarkable consensus emerged.

**Communicating with physicians is becoming more challenging.** Almost all administrators report that communicating with physicians is becoming increasingly difficult. Physicians, particularly community-based physicians, do not come to the hospital as they once did. Fewer opportunities exist to get the hospital’s brand—and important, hospital-specific information—in front of physicians.

**Younger physicians are a strategic priority.** Administrators increasingly understand that, while many older physicians prefer face-to-face contact and traditional print, younger physicians are incorporating technology into their communicating practices. PDAs, e-mail and the Internet are influencing their communication preferences, and many hospitals are looking for ways to create an e-communication channel.

**Physician portals are a focus.** More than half the hospitals surveyed by PHN that currently do not have a portal intend to implement one in the next 12 to 24 months.

**Ongoing promotion of one’s portal is important.** Most hospitals that have implemented a physician portal stated that they have been disappointed in the number of physicians accessing it and are exploring ways to increase awareness and use.

"Creating a successful physician portal is a process requiring strategic commitment, not an event," according to Carolyn Merriman, president of Corporate Health Group. Medical staff, particularly the younger members and those physicians who are comfortable with the Internet, can and will become active users if the portal is created and promoted correctly. What steps can hospitals take to increase their chances of success?

**Assembling Your Team**

In most instances, IT takes the lead in the implementation of a portal. This makes sense when you consider that, at its core, a portal is an information technology. All too often, though, IT focuses on simply getting the service live and then moving on to the next project. Deployment is just the beginning, so it is imperative that the right people round out your portal team to ensure its success. An ideal team would consist of representatives from IT, health information/medical records, nursing, communications, the medical staff office, two to three physician champions and physician relations.

**Planning and Implementation**

A physician’s most precious resource is his time. The hospital’s portal should increase efficiency, improve diagnostic accuracy, include universal access to information and be easy to use.

At its core, a physician portal should provide the following:

- personalized, convenient and secure means of viewing patient information over the Internet, 24/7, for both primary care physicians and the specialists to whom the patient has been referred
- access to schedule appointments online
- secure communication with medical staff and physicians involved in a patient’s care
- a single, comprehensive source of system-wide information

Features can be added as your portal grows and physician adoption increases, but most consultants recommend starting with a suite of portal features, such as multiple views, time frames and selection criteria for lab results and microbiology, pathology, radiology and medical records reports (HiReP) op notes, progress notes, discharge summary, clinic visits, outpatient procedures.

Other features might include printable results and reports using a variety of selection criteria, as well as lab results that...
Training and Promotion

Ongoing, persistent communication is imperative when asking someone to adopt a new behavior, as is an ongoing, comprehensive training program. In terms of physician portals, many hospitals still have the attitude of “build it and they will come.” Unfortunately, experience shows that isn’t enough. There must be a strong, ongoing communication campaign and training in place to ensure physician adoption of the portal.

Key considerations include the following: How will the portal be integrated into your site? How will it be rolled out to physicians and other medical staff? Does your communication plan address the unique needs of the hospital’s internal and external audiences? Are you training your physician reps in the use and value of the portal?

When designing communications to increase physician awareness and participation in a new product, service or technology, pharmaceutical companies have had increased success by ensuring all programs answer three key questions. These questions can easily be applied to promoting a portal:

1. **What’s in it for the physician?** Hospitals often succeed in communicating the portal’s features, but fail to highlight its benefits to physicians. This is key to influencing their behavior. The message has to be persistent, delivered using a variety of communication formats, and targeted. Rarely does a simple rollout campaign bring permanent success.

2. **How are physician opinion leaders and peers using the portal and how are they benefiting?** It’s normal for physicians to care about what their peers are doing and how their own behavior compares. Sharing success stories, providing examples of how one’s peers—particularly physician leaders—are using the portal and benefiting from its use can move even slow adopters to take an additional look. Physician champions are key, persistently reinforcing the portal’s use. These “physician evangelists” should also serve as the hospital’s eyes and ears in gathering feedback from physicians that can be incorporated in the portal’s ongoing development.

3. **What are the barriers to using the portal and how can you overcome them?** Answering this question is critical to the hospital’s success. Examples of barriers to use can include:

   - A lack of understanding of the benefits of using the portal;
   - Concern that it may take more time than it’s worth;
   - Fear of using new technology;
   - A belief that it’s too difficult to learn;
   - Concerns of looking stupid, or a real or perceived lack of support if there is a question or problem.

Focus groups of physicians can help identify barriers. Strategies to overcome these barriers need to be created at the outset, so the hospital is proactive rather than reactive whenever possible.

Ongoing Operations

There are going to be both human errors and technology errors. The efficiency and effectiveness of the support provided is critical to both initial adoption and ongoing use. “A portal requires constant vigilance evaluating user issues. Ongoing training, adding new services, creating incentives, keeping information fresh and constantly looking for ways to increase the portal’s convenience and access to information are all part of that ongoing process,” says Cindy Sheets, CIO at Mt. Carmel Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, an early adapter of physician portals.

“Optimizing the portal’s performance, particularly on issues like speed and site uptime, are critical. Our physicians expect the information to be there and on demand. Our support is 24/7. Additionally, whenever we have a workflow issue, our first thought is how can we address the issue through our portal and then we let our physicians know whenever we make changes or add features,” Sheets says.

Outcomes

Most hospitals conclude that their physician portal is a cost of doing business. In the words of Sheets, “it is part of our bricks and mortar.” The most important question is, are a critical mass of physicians using the portal and finding it beneficial? The real ROI comes when the hospital’s physicians are finding it is saving them time, enhancing the care of their patients and making your hospital the preferred place to practice. In today’s interactive environment, a physician portal is quickly becoming a foundational tool for creating real-time communication. When it is done well, with succinct messages and focused interaction, it becomes a great ally in connecting with one’s medical staff. The bottom line is that no hospital can afford not to do it and do it right!

About the Author

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