

Social media and personal branding: should you get an early start in medical school?

By Raman Singh, OMA Public Affairs Department



THE TERM “PERSONAL BRAND” MAY SOUND LIKE A BUZZWORD, OR A CONCEPT ASSOCIATED WITH MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS, BUT PERSONAL BRANDING HAS AN IMPORTANT PLACE IN MEDICINE. THE RAPID INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF PHYSICIANS TURNING TO SOCIAL MEDIA IS INDICATIVE OF A LARGER TREND IN THE WAY HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS ENGAGE WITH THE INTERNET.

Social media is an umbrella term that encompasses the creation and exchange of user-generated content, such as photos, videos, text and audio using web-based and mobile technologies known as Web 2.0.¹ A personal brand can be defined as who you are and what you want to be known for, and is the practice of marketing yourself *and* your career as a cohesive entity.²

How you present yourself online can have a profound impact on how you are perceived by potential colleagues, employers, and the public *before* any con-

tact is made. And the most accessible tool to create a positive online identity is social media.

We have recently seen an upsurge in the number of Ontario doctors using social media to disseminate health advice, promote their practices, discuss current research and highlight important issues in health care — all while positioning themselves as leaders in their respective areas of expertise. Through platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter and the blogosphere, numerous opportunities exist for you to leverage social media to create a competi-

tive edge for yourself while still in medical school. Below are three important reasons why social media can aid you in your career as a medical professional.

1. Staying up-to-date

Approximately 100,000 tweets are generated per minute by Twitter users.³ These tweets are geared towards thousands of topics and conversations, including health care and medicine. While it may seem odd for medical students and doctors to communicate with others through social media, it gives you the opportunity to con-

Words of Advice

Before you embark on your social media journey, keep these tips in mind:

1. **Material published on the Internet is public:** If confidentiality is desired, refrain from posting.
2. **Exercise caution:** Never identify a patient in any way, and refrain from discussing details about individual cases.
3. **Follow guidelines:** When in doubt, refer to your medical school's social media policy, or to the Canadian Medical Association's Social Media Guidelines for Physicians and/or the Canadian Federation of Medical Student's Guide to Medical Professionalism.
4. **Think twice, post once:** Be mindful of the information you post online and refrain from posting derogatory or misinformed comments. Social media is instant, and anything you post can be seen by anyone.
5. **Choose a platform that best suits you:** Twitter and LinkedIn are best used for professional purposes, while Facebook is mainly used for personal social networking.
6. **Make connections:** Follow organizations and individuals of interest to you.
7. **Have fun:** Use the opportunity to engage with others in professional conversations and friendly debate about the issues and topics that matter most to you. Don't be afraid to ask questions and spark conversations.

tribute to online conversations with other medical providers, health care organizations, policy-makers, government officials, and most importantly, the public. Social media affords you the ability to transcend geographic boundaries and have discussions with medical students and doctors around the world, giving you insights from a variety of online influencers.

Most government organizations, hospitals, associations and news outlets maintain social media profiles. Social media can help you stay up-to-date on news, political action and policy changes, as well as present the opportunity to offer your own opinions on current events. By doing this, you can foster personal relevance, cultivate knowledge beyond the classroom or medical practice, and keep up with the latest research. If you're interested in establishing a social media presence, don't just *listen* to conversations, but *engage* in two-way conversations. Think as if you're continuing a friendly classroom debate in the online sphere — just with a larger audience, and potentially more learning opportunities.

2. Everything happens online

We live in a digital world, and when it comes to medicine, it has been said that "social media technologies can augment traditional medical humanities education efforts and perhaps even improve them, as well as prepare students for a future in which social media will play a significant role in medicine."⁴ An increasing number of medical schools in the United States have integrated social media into their curricula in order to enhance learning opportunities. Medical students at Penn State College of Medicine enrolled in the course, The Narratives Aging: Explor-

ing Creative Approaches to Dementia Care, found themselves regularly using platforms such as YouTube to provide cross-cultural perspectives on aging and mental health. They also used Twitter for real-time communication between fellow students and their course instructor while conducting storytelling sessions at an assisted-living facility. Twitter allowed the instructor to track student observations and respond to questions in real-time. It also created an archive of insights that were later reviewed during classroom discussion. This has allowed for deeper engagement with course materials and frequent two-way communication between instructors and peers.

With this in mind, why not start this year of medical school with the goal of creating a deeper digital presence for yourself? Follow and participate in Twitter chats, such as #HCSMCA (Health Care Social Media Canada) — a community of tweeters exploring medical social innovation by sharing ideas and engaging in friendly debate about the latest health care news in Canada. By participating in the online conversation, you can establish yourself as a thought leader and acquire the tools and skill sets for networking, collaboration and problem solving.

3. Creating a positive online identity

When doctors type their name into a Google search, chances are physician-ranking websites such as RateMDs lead the search results. The content of these websites and reviews do not always accurately reflect a physician's medical competence. A strong web presence on your part can provide patients and the public with professional online content that is controlled by you. The presence of

this content can counterbalance reviews and opinions, and contribute credible medical advice. It is an effective form of reputation management, and according to DeCamp, Koenig, and Chisolm, "medical training is a critical developmental period when social media can positively shape professional identity and vice versa."⁵ Adopting social media and deciding what you want your digital footprint to convey early in your career can be very beneficial for personal and professional growth. It gives you the time to iron out any inconsistencies and merge your professional and personal identities into a unique personal brand. ■

References:

1. Kaplan AM, Haenlein M. Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Bus Horiz*. 2010 Jan-Feb;53(1): 59-68.
2. Lair DJ, Sullivan K, Cheney G. Marketization and the recasting of the professional self: the rhetoric and ethics of personal branding. *Manage Commun Q*. 2005 Feb;18(3):307-343.
3. International Association of Chiefs of Police. Center for Social Media. Fun facts.[Internet]. Alexandria, VA: International Association of Chiefs of Police; n.d. [about 5 screens]. Available at: <http://www.iacpsocialmedia.org/Resources/FunFacts.aspx>. Accessed: 2013 Jun 13.
4. George DR, Dellasega C. Use of social media in graduate-level medical humanities education: two pilot studies from Penn State College of Medicine. *Med Teach*. 2011;33(8):e429-34. Available at: <http://informahealthcare.com/doi/abs/10.3109/0142159X.2011.586749>. Accessed: 2013 Jun 13.
5. DeCamp M, Koenig TW, Chisolm MS. Social media and physicians' online identity crisis. *JAMA*. 2013 Aug 14;310(6):581-2. Available at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3954788/>. Accessed: 2013 Jun 13.