Social Networks Uncovered: 10 Tips Every Plastic Surgeon Should Know

Phillip Dauwe, MD; Justin B. Heller, MD; Jacob G. Unger, MD; Darrell Graham, MD; and Rod J. Rohrich, MD

Abstract

Understanding online social networks is of critical importance to the plastic surgeon. With knowledge, it becomes apparent that the numerous networks available are similar in their structure, usage, and function. The key is communication between Internet media such that one maximizes exposure to patients. This article focuses on 2 social networking platforms that we feel provide the most utility to plastic surgeons. Ten tips are provided for incorporation of Facebook and Twitter into your practice.

Keywords

Internet, Facebook, Twitter, social network, LinkedIn, public relations, advertising, blog, mass media, online

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Public relations are a mechanism by which you reach out to prospective patients without direct solicitation (advertising). As stated by Charlene Li of Forrester Research, “[Online social networking] is a trend in which people use technologies to get [information] from each other, rather than from traditional means.”¹ Traditional means of marketing and information gathering include charities, social events, print and media advertisements, and market research.

Competition in the changing health care environment makes public relations increasingly important. However, both in residency education and within our literature, there is a paucity of information about how to effectively establish and secure patient relationships. It is with this intent that we address public relations and advertising through the use of online social networks in this article.

Today’s market requires the plastic surgeon to connect with patients using methods that are personal, educational, and up-to-date. These methods must be economical as well. Social networking fits the bill. A social network is a structure of individuals (or organizations) that are tied together by 1 or more specific type of interdependency. People join these online networks for love, self-expression, opinion sharing, showing off, fun, nostalgia, and profit.² Plastic surgeons may join for the same benefits: stronger doctor-patient relationships, better education and support for patients, input on ongoing online conversations regarding plastic surgery, and ultimately increased patient exposure.

Internet-based social networks have grown to a point that they can no longer be overlooked. In 2011, Facebook served over 750 million people, with 50% of active users logging in daily. Twitter serves 175 million with 99 million active monthly users, and LinkedIn serves over 120 million with approximately 66 million active monthly users³–⁷ (Table 1). There are 7 core truths that apply to any of these social networks. First, social media are the preferred method of communication for the younger demographic. Second, users provide detailed profile information about, among other things, their age, sex, and interests, which can help with targeted marketing. Third, avid Internet use correlates with increased usage of social media sites. Thus, usage is likely to continue rising with increased computer literacy. Fourth, one person’s online habits influence other users (“viral” spread). Fifth, social networking sites are not substitutes for traditional marketing but rather

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adjuncts. Sixth, rules for these networks are still being established. Seventh, and perhaps most important for the physician, everything on a social networking site is open access and largely visible.²

In 2008, Thomson et al⁸ noted that 45% of medical students and residents had an account on Facebook. Of these, more than half listed their sexual orientation, political perspective, and relationship status for all to see. A recent report by Wheeler et al⁹ revealed that over a quarter (28%) of American plastic surgeons used some form of social media for marketing purposes in 2011.

The New England Journal of Medicine, Cancer, and multiple other prominent journals have highlighted issues that arise from social media presence.⁸,¹⁰-¹³ Physicians must, at all times, maintain professionalism and respect patient confidentiality. They must remember that their personal profiles are also visible to varying extents. Security settings may be changed to limit public access, but naturally, the information we seek from social networks is the very same others seek from us. With this disclaimer in mind, we describe how to optimize the use of social networking platforms in your practice.

**FACEBOOK**

Facebook is a social network that allows people to connect with others on a casual, fun basis. It allows users to locate and “add” colleagues to a list of “friends” easily by searching the user’s e-mail address book for existing members and inviting those who have not yet joined. This automated service makes getting back in touch easy and staying in contact even easier, as members can keep track of each other’s activities. Professionally speaking, users can create a group or fan page on Facebook to promote their services and mentor existing clients or publicize their expertise. What follows are 5 elements of importance when implementing Facebook in a plastic surgery practice.

1. **Facebook Fan Page vs. Group**

When developing a Facebook marketing strategy, plastic surgeons will be faced with the question of how to best reach their audience, as merely having a single-user (individual) profile is often insufficient. Facebook offers 2 modalities for reaching an audience: “fan pages” and “groups.” A fan page is essentially the “user profile” for a practice, whereas a group is a collection of users with similar interests (an online private club). We recommend fan pages for plastic surgeons. The reasons behind our preference are best summarized in Table 2, where the logistical differences between the 2 profiles are detailed. Facebook disables group messaging when the group exceeds 5000 users, whereas all “fans” of a fan page may be messaged by any user regardless of the number. Group messaging is privately displayed on a group page, whereas fan page updates are broadcast to all users’ “news feeds” and profiles, which even some nonmembers can see. Fan pages are also indexed by Google, whereas groups are not. This means that content posted to your fan page will be searchable on Google, adding to your search engine optimization (SEO). Special events and discussions can be hosted on both types of profile, but applications (see next section) can be run only on a fan page. Overall, fan pages are superior because they offer more marketing functionality than groups and are not limited to 5000 users.

2. **Applications**

In May 2007, Facebook announced its developers platform, which allows individuals and companies to develop software applications relevant to their field, much like the well-known “apps” on Apple’s iPhone. With this programming option, Facebook rapidly rose in popularity to overtake all other social networks. This feature offers the plastic surgeon interconnection of web pages and enhanced visibility to patients on the web. Companies such as Involver and Wildfire provide this service externally, but Facebook provides an easy platform where a basic knowledge of the programs provided will allow the user to interconnect his or her websites to enhance and integrate combined traffic.

Facebook’s Profile HTML function allows users to design applications whereby external webpages can be linked to a Facebook fan page. The steps are straightforward and easily accomplished with a Facebook tutorial. Network pages can be further integrated by incorporating a “Follow Me on Twitter” app or a link to relevant videos published on YouTube. Facebook Notes or the Networked Blog app allows users to import an independent blog to a Facebook page. Furthermore, blog posts and updates on your Twitter page can be exported/integrated using Facebook’s Twitter app; to avoid cluttering a Facebook page, the Selective Tweet Status app allows a user to select which posts you want to syndicate with Facebook.

TypePad or Google Blogger exports Facebook posts back to the blog on an independent (practice or personal) website. Thus, all of a surgeon’s major social networks and other websites can be interconnected, such that he or she can reach larger audiences with accountability and without redundant entries.¹⁴ In addition, search engines such

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<th>Social Network</th>
<th>Number of Users</th>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>750 Million</td>
<td>Most popular in the world</td>
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<td>Twitter</td>
<td>175 Million</td>
<td>Growing</td>
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<td>LinkedIn</td>
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<td>My Space</td>
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<td>#1 from 2006-08</td>
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<td>Friendster</td>
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<td>Asian market</td>
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as Google heavily index sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. The repetition of “hits” on a certain topic will enhance your visibility and traffic to each of your pages.

### 3. Advertising

The Facebook advertising platform publishes advertisements in the margin as a user navigates through Facebook pages. Ads are limited to 135-character taglines and 1 image. The advertisement, when clicked, routes potential patients to either a Facebook business page or the surgeon’s independent website, depending on preference.

Example rhinoplasty ad: **Trouble breathing? Snoring at night? Click to learn about surgical and nonsurgical options.**

Ads such as this can help surgeons develop leads and build a “fan base,” which can then be used for direct marketing through wall posts and private messaging. With the growth of sites such as Facebook, social network-based advertising has become increasingly important.

Surgeons who decide to pursue offers and incentives to procure leads should remember that this is a slippery slope. First, it becomes difficult to create compelling offers that still maintain and reinforce a solid reputation. Our suggestion is to base your offers or taglines only in truth and be explicit about what is included/excluded. Also, we suggest that the offers should not be repetitive. For example, “Botox Days” (specific days when injectables are offered at discounted price) have been a popular trend capitalizing on quantity. Unfortunately, a problem arises when patients simply wait for the next Botox day to be retreated, rather than becoming a regular and valued patient in your practice. Special days and deals may be beneficial when introducing new products, but surgeons should understand that events such as this are purely for advertising purposes. They lack value in garnering real public relationships and thereby lack the ability to establish loyal patients who seek additional treatments beyond the special offers. Finally, offers should be exclusive to Facebook fans, as this will promote direct interaction with the surgeon or practice. One means of achieving this is by posting exclusive offers to a private Facebook page that is only visible to those following your page.

### 4. Campaign Strategy and Pricing

Through Facebook, physicians can target ads to reach different user profiles that contain information such as age, sex, education, occupation, relationship status, ethnicity, and interests. (This is a major step beyond the options offered by Google ads, which are limited to geographic profiling.) For example, a physician can choose to target-advertise breast augmentation to 20- to 40-year-old women in a specific area for breast augmentation, rhytidectomy to 50- to 70-year-old women in the same area, and so on. The overall demographics of Facebook’s users should also be considered to help guide marketing decisions. For example, as of 2010, the 35- to 54-year-old group represented nearly 30% of Facebook registrants, whereas people ages 55 and older represented less than 10% (although this was an increase from 2009 of 922.7%).

Also, physicians can choose whether campaigns should run indefinitely or for a scheduled amount of time and whether they want to pay for clicks or pay for views. “Pay for Clicks” (also called “cost per click” or CPC) advertising allows the user to specify a certain amount he or she is willing to pay each time another user actually clicks on the ad. “Pay for Views” (also called “cost per thousand impressions” or CPM) advertising allows the advertiser to specify how much he or she is willing to pay for 1000 views (or impressions) of the page displaying the ad. Either system allows the advertiser to bid on a maximum amount to pay for clicks/views and provide daily budget allowance. The ad will run as long as the account has not exceeded a certain number of clicks or views, as specified by the daily budget.

### 5. Performance Tracking

Tracking the performance of an advertisement is perhaps the most important aspect of any marketing campaign. Although advertisers must pay for performance data on conventional web-based ads through companies such as Google Analytics and MDprospects (Glacial Multimedia, Inc, Westbrook, Maine), Facebook provides this function for free. Physicians can view the demographics of the users clicking on or viewing their ads and tailor them accordingly. One disadvantage is that Facebook is unable to track the lead closure rate (ie, how many users who click on your ad actually become patients). As such, it may be beneficial for a surgeon using this tool to create an Excel database to profile his or her patient demographics.

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<th>Table 2. Facebook Fan Pages vs Facebook Group Pages</th>
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<td>Where are updates posted?</td>
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<td>Event creation?</td>
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and then extrapolate the lead closure rate from Facebook advertisements. This can be done by incorporating a discount coupon in the advertisement (ie, “Mention this advertisement for 15% off your next treatment”).

**TWITTER**

Twitter is a social networking site that enables individuals and businesses to share information via text posts known as “tweets.” Twitter is a “microblog,” through which users can tweet up to 140 characters at a time. Users post information on a public or private forum to update their subscribers (“followers”) on what they are doing. Twitter has experienced rapid growth since its launch in July 2006. The company published 400,000 tweets per quarter in 2007, 100 million per quarter in 2008, and in 2010, the company boasted an average of 50 million tweets daily.

Like Facebook, Twitter allows users to locate and add colleagues by searching their e-mail address book for existing members and inviting those who have not yet joined. Once someone is “following” a physician’s profile (business or personal) on Twitter, anything posted to that profile appears on that person’s “feed,” which contains all posted information from accounts to which he or she has subscribed.

Plastic surgeons can use Twitter to tap into the already robust conversations and information published on topics within plastic surgery. To see this in action, we encourage you to search rhinoplasty on the Twitter main page (www.twitter.com) and take note of the plethora of posts available for patients to read. Once established on Twitter, you can join this trend and quickly share new developments in your practice, as well as gather insight into what prospective patients are seeking based on tweets related to plastic surgery procedures and topics. The following are 5 tips for using Twitter.

1. **“Follow Me on Twitter” Icon**

Twitter enables users to include the Twitter logo as an icon on their personal webpage, indicated by a “Follow me on Twitter” logo. When a user clicks the icon, that person will be directed to the Twitter page, where he or she is given the opportunity to follow the tweets from that page. If used correctly, this line of communication can differentiate a plastic surgeon’s practice from others in the area and lead to an office visit.

Unlike in other surgical subspecialties, the typical patient in a plastic surgery practice does not arrive by way of professional (physician) referral. Rather, cosmetic surgery patients are most often gained by “word-of-mouth” advertising and, as computer literacy has increased, by self-directed web-based research. The Twitter icon is becoming more universally recognized by users as a line of direct communication with the entity of interest. This resource can be invaluable to the savvy surgeon and, best of all, it is free.

2. **Twitter “On the Go”**

Mobile phones facilitate the rapid transmission of information in the busy workday. Twitter offers mobile functionality to people who desire quick access to this information. Notifications can be sent to users’ mobile phones via SMS message when you tweet information, if they have clicked the phone icon next to the “Following” button on a given page to receive mobile phone updates from that profile. “Fast Follow” is an option that allows people to receive tweets from you without even creating an account of their own. They can text “Follow Dr XYZ” to 40404 to receive tweets from Dr XYZ. This way, posts can be easily transmitted to interested patients who are reliant on their mobile phones for information.

3. **Search Engine Indexing**

Tweets are not private to Twitter unless specifically protected by the user on the website. Information placed on Twitter is archived and searchable on sites such as Google.com and Bing.com. In this way, prospective patients searching for related topics through these search engines can be led to a physician’s Twitter page for information on that topic. This presents an incentive to make the practice’s Twitter profile public (ie, not protect the tweets) and to continually update the profile with new developments and points of interest.

4. **Promoted Tweets**

In 2010, Twitter launched a beta testing program for an advertising platform similar to the one offered by Facebook. “Promoted Tweets” are standard tweets that are endorsed (paid for) by the user to appear at the top of followers’ timelines and results pages when a relevant search is performed. When this platform is available to all users, surgeons can target Promoted Tweets to particular followers’ timelines and the timelines of other users who are connected to the targeted users. This enables physicians to reach users who are most receptive to the message. “Promoted Tweets” are offered on a cost-per-engagement (CPE) basis. The advertisers pay your specified bid price (eg, $0.02) each time their promoted tweet is clicked, “re-tweeted” (reposted by a follower), replied to, or marked as favorite. You can sign up on the Twitter.com homepage to be notified when Promoted Tweets are officially released for all users.

5. **Advertiser Analytics**

Twitter offers its advertisers a metric tracking service to monitor the impact of their tweets and accounts. This service reports the number of impressions (views), clicks, replies, and followers generated by the account. This information is available in a “timeline” format, so the
activity level is presented in chronological order. Data on any user’s followers (albeit limited to sex, city, and interests) are also available. In addition, external website owners utilizing the “Follow me on Twitter” button will gain insight into how much Twitter traffic they receive using a service called “Twitter Analytics.” This new service, powered by BackType—a social analytics company acquired by Twitter in 2011—will provide valuable information much like the internal advertiser analytics tool.

**DISCUSSION**

This article is intended to serve as a foundation for understanding the potential impact of social networks on a plastic surgery practice. The key for any surgeon is to establish communication between all networks, such that he or she maximizes exposure and the potential patient base. Another invaluable resource to which a physician’s social networking site may route patients is the “Ask a Surgeon” feature on the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS) website, www.surgery.org. This feature allows patients to review previously asked questions, as well as pose new questions to a panel of board-certified plastic surgeons. Questions are typically answered in a timely fashion, usually by multiple board-certified plastic surgeons.

Essentially, our “brand” is whatever our patients say it is, and people love to communicate. Listening to our patients is perhaps the most essential skill in plastic surgery. Positive and negative reviews are invaluable, as it educates us about our own brand. It is also important to note that how you handle negative reviews is perhaps more important than how you handle positive ones. For instance, if patients see constructive responses to negative reviews, this may build a strong rapport. As a result of the open and immediate communication they offer, all forms of social networking can both help and potentially harm a physician’s image. We would be remiss if we did not recommend conservatism in this article. The key for any surgeon is to establish communication between all networks, such that he or she maximizes exposure and the potential patient base. Another invaluable resource to which a physician’s social networking site may route patients is the “Ask a Surgeon” feature on the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS) website, www.surgery.org. This feature allows patients to review previously asked questions, as well as pose new questions to a panel of board-certified plastic surgeons. Questions are typically answered in a timely fashion, usually by multiple board-certified plastic surgeons.

As discussed in the July 2011 Bulletin for the American College of Surgeons, physicians should be cautious when providing medical advice to patients online. Potential liabilities include advising patients located in a state where the physician is not licensed, medical malpractice, and patient abandonment (if the patient believes that a treatment relationship has been established). For these reasons, we suggest that only educational material be published on online forums, and we encourage physicians to refrain from advising patients directly. Rather, encourage patients to schedule an office visit to discuss their medical care.

A shortcoming of this article is its solely descriptive nature, with no mention of objective data supporting the benefit of online social networking to a plastic surgery practice. This information, as well as anecdotal physician testimonials of success with these modalities, would be useful. In addition, multiple social media outlets such as LinkedIn, Google, YouTube, MySpace, and Flickr were not discussed in detail here. Further education regarding other popular social media outlets and their interconnections, as well as further studies defining the role and usefulness of these marketing venues, is needed.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The world has seen a permanent shift in the way people communicate over the past 7 to 8 years, as social networking has become an indispensable facet of our daily lives. This article provides a raw tutorial on how to incorporate online networking sites into plastic surgery practices. Right now, patients are searching surgeons’ names, self-educating on procedures, and openly communicating online about our “brands.” It is essential for the savvy plastic surgeon to tap into this movement and embrace the opportunity to improve/expand his or her practice.

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**REFERENCES**