

Leadership and Strategic Communications: Optimizing Academic Health Center Messaging

Association of Academic Health Centers

Report from the 2012 AAHC Annual Meeting



Association of Academic Health Centers®
Leading institutions that serve society

Recognizing that academic health centers need forward-looking, comprehensive, and integrated communications programs that support the organization's strategic plan and vision, leaders from academic health centers and social media organizations convened at the Association of Academic Health Centers (AAHC) 2012 Annual Meeting to share best practices and lessons learned in building an effective communications strategy.

The meeting underscored that communications and messaging, especially in the context of healthcare system reform, are transforming the paradigm of academic health centers' usual business practices. With the rise of social media as a significant and essential part of the information dissemination chain, the result of instantaneous messaging has shifted control from "top down" to content creation and interaction at the user level. The fundamental impact for academic health centers is that the dynamics of communications are now more effective, efficient, and *vulnerable*. Meeting participants emphasized that academic health center leadership cannot afford reactive communications policies, but should take advantage of the vast opportunities for outreach, engagement, and integration in their communications strategy.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF MEDIA AND THE COMMUNICATIONS PARADIGM

An integrated communications strategy incorporates the fundamental changes that are underway in the media landscape. Indicative of the significant changes in how people consume information today is that the proportion of Americans who read newspapers and magazines continues to decline, while online and digital news consumption is on the rise, with more people now obtaining news on cell phones, tablets, or other mobile platforms.¹ Also, consumers used

LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS: OPTIMIZING ACADEMIC HEALTH CENTER MESSAGING

Optimal communications strategies no longer rely on traditional media outlets alone to carry the academic health center message

to receive their information from only a handful of traditional media outlets: print, radio, and television. But with the advent of online media outlets, cable news, blogs, and social networking sites, the options for where and how information is obtained have dramatically increased.

This new communications paradigm offers opportunities for news and information consumption that are expansive, diverse, and splintered; and, as such, is a defining force in communications strategies. The “democratization” of information is now an important dynamic of communications. Traditional media outlets are trying to incorporate new media, including social media and user-generated content; however, frequently information originates from and goes straight to consumers, bypassing traditional outlets altogether. No longer can institutions rely on “top-down” messaging or control what is said and who says it.

Academic health center leaders need to understand the key features of this new landscape, its tools of the trade, and how to best incorporate these tools into their messaging and overall communications strategy in the era of social media. Optimal communications strategies no longer rely on traditional media outlets alone to carry the academic health center message, but address the advances and challenges in communications outreach.

OVERVIEW OF MEDIA AND MESSAGING TOOLS

As the nature of communications changes, the means for communications and messaging have grown exponentially in the past decade. These tools for presenting and controlling the academic health center message offer greater adaptability, immediacy, and consistency. Social media is now a primary platform for communications, and attention to visual content remains at the forefront

of managing messaging impact. Online, video, and social media platforms educate and engage viewers beyond what was commonly a singular interaction. Integration of media messaging tools—especially social media—is critical for powerful and long-lasting messaging.

Social Media: Release the experts and control the message

The many tools of social media—Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs, hash tags, apps, etc.—can play a significant role in supporting a larger communications strategy for an academic health center. For example:

- apps can be developed to allow access to medical records or up-to-date medical information;
- online patient feedback can be used to focus on the value academic health centers offer their communities;
- academic health center-based online patient communities can provide support for patients, and their families, sharing similar illnesses and disabilities, as well as deliver current news on available and preventative care offered at the academic health center;
- an academic health center Facebook page can feature medical care personnel, diseases and treatments, research activities, patient’s personal stories of treatment and care, and, most importantly, allow for engagement and interaction;
- blogs can provide an opportunity for thought leadership in health policy debates as well as the essential academic health center messaging;
- effectively named hashtags can be used to provide immediate academic health center response to an illness outbreak in the community, such as the recent cases of Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome in camping environments—thereby providing the public with trusted, accurate information; and
- Twitter can offer one of the most effective means for academic health centers to cultivate relationships, share information, and respond to immediate events.

Essentially, an academic health center can use social media tools to assert its prominence and leadership in community outreach and media relevance, as well as in disseminating accurate and trustworthy information. Quick and nimble response capabilities allow academic health centers to engage and build relationships with key constituencies.

Visual Media: Utilize the power of imagery and message

The importance of visual media in presenting the academic health center message cannot be overstated. The increasing availability of visual media platforms opens up multiple options for presenting a resonating, visual message. Be it through patient stories, interviews, or information on a particular disease or treatment, video allows the opportunity for users to understand and digest content in a deeper, enduring way, bringing to life an academic health center's mission.

Internet and Social Media Platforms

YouTube, one of the most prominent internet video platforms, is a good example of a means to effectively communicate visual presentations of academic health center expertise to a broad-based audience, as well as build brand name and reputation. Podcasts and videos can be created and placed on internet platforms to celebrate research breakthroughs, provide simple medical explanations on diseases and outbreaks, feature the expertise of doctors and other healthcare providers, respond to current health events, or define and offer feedback on the latest trends in nutrition, exercise, home healthcare, etc. And, these audio/visual elements can easily be integrated into other social media, such as imbedding on blogs and websites.

The institution's website should provide visual content supporting both the academic health center message and its social media outreach. Links to informative podcasts, Facebook messaging, Twitter feeds, and blogs can be invaluable in cultivating relationships and branding the academic health center as a primary source for information and community leadership. Website videos can enhance that outreach. For

Be it through patient stories, interviews, or information on a particular disease or treatment, video allows the opportunity for users to understand and digest content in a deeper, enduring way, bringing to life an academic health center's mission.

example, a Tweet may give 140 characters about a new diagnostic tool, but a website can provide more in-depth information, possibly incorporating pictures and/or video. A television ad may offer a brief glimpse of a patient story that positively features the academic health center, but content online could offer a richer experience by providing more detail, creating a deeper connection to the institution. A simple, memorable tagline can develop familiarity with the academic health center, and the website could expand on the message—its value, history, and significance.

There is a clear investment cost in developing the visual story that features an academic health center. However, technology costs can be controlled. Experts in high-end studio and editing equipment can certainly produce a quality presentation, but low-cost technology solutions are also available. For example, low-end video cameras, such as the "flip-style" camera, offer good-quality videos at relatively low technology costs; and they provide an excellent means for immediate messaging responses in fast-paced events or crises. Equipping appropriate staff with these tools and controlling the information release could allow academic health centers to make a difference in public perception of an institution or during a crisis.

Traditional Media Outlets

Like YouTube and other video internet platforms, television is a powerful medium to present visual content that reaches a wide audience; it can also target specific audiences like the local community. Effective television and radio ads are personal, engaging, and authentic narratives that have the power to inspire a community and generate a positive perception of the academic health center. As noted above, a television ad

can be even more effective if integrated with the academic health center's social media outreach efforts. While television advertising can be costly, local advertising during heightened periods of viewership—such as the Super Bowl and other widely viewed events—can be a cost-effective way to reach a large, local audience with the price of a single ad.

It is also worth the outreach effort, including the use of social media tools such as Twitter and hashtags, for an academic health center to build and maintain relationships with news stations—including radio stations—establishing a positive reputation as a knowledgeable and trusted media source. Traditional news outlets still play an important role in how people receive their current information. According to a survey, 72% of adults report following local news most of the time.²

Print: Reach readers with a snapshot

Although the common viewpoint is that it is becoming less relevant, the print media is still an important tool worth utilizing in a communications and messaging strategy.³ To elaborate upon the well-known adage: a picture is worth a thousand words, but with a short story or simple tagline you can narrate a long-lasting impression. Like television and radio, the print media is an effective means to reach a more targeted local audience. Again, adding social media tools into this traditional media outreach moves the conversation from “one-way” to a “two-way” engagement, affording academic health centers immediate and effective communication with its expanding public.

DEFINING THE MESSAGE AND DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

As noted above, taking advantage of the transformation in communications is essential to an academic health center's business and operational strategies in an era of rapid change or in response to unexpected developments. Important elements of an academic health center's image, vision, significance, and growth that can be optimized with a well-coordinated

A coordinated communications strategy will engage both [internal and external stakeholders] with a cohesive and integrated message centering on the academic health center and its vision.

communications program include: developing and maintaining relationships, messaging during crises, and motivating behaviors.

Building, Cultivating, and Leveraging Relationships

For academic health centers, communications outreach has two clearly defined target groups – internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. A coordinated communications strategy will engage both groups with a cohesive and integrated message centering on the academic health center and its vision. Integral to the message is the emphasis on keeping it personal, authentic, responsive, and informative.

Internal communications stakeholders include health care practitioners, students, researchers, and staff. For these stakeholders, academic health centers should focus on changing an outlook or attitude from “mine” to “ours”. This simple principle can be central to making all feel included and actively engaged in advancing the academic health center vision and community. Useful tools to engage internal stakeholders include managing intra-institutional blogs for feedback; featuring medical practitioners or programs in podcasts or on the webpage; highlighting those with expertise or reports of advances in research on Twitter and in newsfeeds; and engaging staff in narrating personal or patient healing stories to share with the community.

External communications stakeholders include the community outside the institution itself—e.g., patients, the general public, the media, policymakers, government, funding groups, and the business community. Defining its vision and mission clearly is an important facet of academic health center outreach to external stakeholders. A simple, easy-to-remember tagline as part of the academic health center branding can be useful in

maintaining its community image and reputation. Useful tools for messaging outreach to external stakeholders can include holding and posting videos of fundraising events that highlight and recognize partners who provide health care to the community—e.g., emergency care personnel, 911 callers and responders, on-the-scene caregivers, families, and staff at all levels of care. Conducting and podcasting or videotaping special events can be a powerful means to influence internal and external community pride and connectivity to the academic health center vision. Website and other social media platforms can be used to link to local businesses, government agencies, and other services that partner with the academic health center in supporting its patients and vision. Communications outreach can also extend to local schools, using social media to tie-in education and training programs for youth.

Online and new media can also provide opportunities to create communities among external stakeholders. Academic health centers can offer means for patients and their families to engage in online support groups centered on common experiences. Facebook or other social media outreach platforms can create a way to share feedback and offer informational support. In addition, institutions should monitor conversations on platforms, like Facebook, where stakeholders interactively engage in information exchange, and establish themselves as responsive community leaders and authentic information providers.

As the nature and means of communications advance and evolve, investing in a communications strategy that engages the external community through consistent messaging and outreach activities will cultivate long-lasting and collaborative support for the academic health center mission and initiatives. Not only is integration of communications tools and outreach essential to the message, but integration of an effective communications strategy with the academic health center business strategy is fundamental in the transformed dynamics of healthcare and health system reform.

Messaging during Crisis Management

Unfortunately, unexpected events may occur and stress the academic health center's resources and leadership, often referred to as "black swan events." A messaging and communications policy with specific protocol and procedures is crucial to operations management during natural disasters and other crisis situations. A delayed, reactive, or ineffective message has the potential to allow serious reputational damage and undo the positive outreach of other communications efforts.

To the extent that there can be planning for natural disaster crises (hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, fires), preparation and response timeliness are central. Academic health centers should have a communications strategy that takes into consideration:

- **Resource management:** leaders should review potential loss of basic resources and their consequences during a natural disaster. For example, are the back-up generators necessary for medical care and communications protected from potential floods/fires; how will internal communications be preserved during power outages (e.g., cell phones need to be charged); are there enough batteries and alternative means for communication if power is lost (e.g., tools may come down to walkie talkies); who has responsibility for external messaging during the crisis; and, what is the message that must be clearly presented.
- **Community connection:** it is crucial for the academic health center to assure the community of its resources and availability to provide assistance, or of its inability to respond during an insurmountable crisis. A picture of an academic health center overflowing with patients and unable to provide care can be a powerfully negative image. Maintaining good relationships with local media can help get the proper message out to a community, including a request for reinforcements.
- **Response time:** the timeliness of communicating the academic health center message during crises is equally significant. Because points of view communicated by other parties can dominate the public

Though it is impossible to plan for all scenarios, institutions should plan for the most likely, and do “table top” exercises with all relevant parties including academic health center leadership, communications personnel, and legal staff.

perspective, delays in presenting the academic health center position can result in costs, both economic and reputational.

- **Alternative leadership:** natural disasters can easily impact the availability of “organizational chart” leaders to respond. Leadership should be prepared with a list of responders and organizers that penetrates multiple organizational levels, and advanced media training is essential for all spokespersons and their back-ups.
- **The power of social media:** Twitter, in particular, can provide rapid and timely responses. Academic health centers should work to establish themselves as a trusted source of information. Establishing a relevant hashtag, as well as incorporating and monitoring other hashtags can help followers find information easily. Timing is crucial, as those who are first on social media often have more influence on the information delivered.

In addition to the considerations during natural disaster crises noted above, social crises can present other communications issues of concern. In an era of instant messaging and camera phones, negative images of on-campus events can be broadcast prior to leadership response or without proper context. These images and events could have a negative impact on the public trust of the institution and its leadership. Though it is impossible to plan for all scenarios, institutions should plan for the most likely, and do “table top” exercises with all relevant parties including academic health center leadership, communications personnel, and legal staff.

A defined communications response strategy should highlight the importance of academic health center leadership being available and prepared in presenting timely

and accurate information. Also, transparency in communications with local media and social media can have significant dividends, such as ensuring the public’s perception of honesty and trustworthiness. Although there may be times when it will be difficult for leadership to directly communicate with the public (e.g., in the case of police action that results in a “gag order” on information delivery), advance planning and a better understanding of an institution’s vulnerabilities can help mitigate weaknesses and improve the ability to control the message in a time of crisis.

Motivating Behavior

Communications can be a powerful tool to influence and motivate behavior. Academic health centers should consider the use of effective messaging that targets individual behavior and mobilizes the community to advance its health and well-being, as well as the academic health center mission.

For example, as part of their education mission, academic health centers strive to attract the best students and offer the best programs. A strong message using current social media communications tools can motivate young people to choose healthcare delivery as a profession and influence their choice for a particular institution. Social media platforms can also expand training program opportunities and student diversity, utilizing crowd-sourcing blogs with no geographic boundaries, a program Wiki page, and videoconferencing tools. Additionally, as part of the academic health center business strategy, community outreach messaging can leverage relationships to support the growth or expansion of an institution, as well as build support on policies that may affect its research enterprise (e.g., funding, stem cell research).

Equally, staff can be motivated to take pride in their positions and their institution with use of integrated social media communications that encourage connectivity—such as on-line group discussions—and feedback. As noted earlier, a strong tagline or logo can be helpful in building motivation within the institution, as well as defining the organization externally.

Academic health centers should also consider how they can impact a community through messaging that targets population health. For example, they could undertake communications outreach using social media tools to encourage behavioral change and healthy choices among the patient population and hard-to-reach populations as part of an overarching strategy to address the social determinants of health. Social media is valuable in the enhanced opportunities it offers for a messaging and communications strategy that is integrated with and supports the academic health center business strategy, mission, and goals.

MEASURING OUTCOMES

The expanded opportunities in communications can offer many ways to measure the outcomes from investments in messaging tools. Some outcomes can be significant and measured in tangible ways such as increased patronage, greater employee pride and engagement, and even a larger and more superior pool of potential students. Other outcomes can be measured in smaller, yet meaningful ways, such as immediate constituent feedback. It should be noted that while the two-way channel offers increased opportunity for organizations to hear directly from their constituents, it also creates a new challenge—the need for immediate response. The online communities, blogs, and Twitter offer many examples of instant and direct feedback that, in the past, were difficult to capture from constituents, but these messaging communities also require proactive monitoring to manage the organization's online reputation.

Other outcomes will appear as ripple effects beyond the immediate network of supporters, and can be measured through online impressions or exposures. For example, the number of “Likes,” “Shares,” and “Retweets” can be monitored to determine the popularity and reach of a particular online message beyond just the institution's followers. Other data can also assist in determining success of social media messaging—e.g., spikes in webpage visits. For advertising integrated with social media, communicators can measure “click-thrus” and also run surveys to determine if an

institution has improved in “perceived attributes” within its targeted community.

While the costs of developing large social media platforms can be sizeable, particularly when accounting for staff time, the potential impact and increased audience interaction can play an important role not only in the institution's communications strategy but also in the overall academic health center business strategy that envisions growth in an environment of healthcare reform and health system transformation.

CONCLUSION

The significance of a coordinated and current communications strategy was highlighted at AAHC's 2012 Annual Meeting. As noted by AAHC President and CEO Dr. Steven A. Wartman, “Regardless of how outstanding an academic health science center may be, it is only through effective communication that achievements are fully recognized, difficulties explained, and institutional vision understood.”⁴

The dynamics of communications and messaging has changed. Traditional media—television, radio, and print—while still relevant, are no longer the only means through which an academic health center should be communicating its message and reaching its target stakeholders. It is important to extend the academic health center message to the vast pool of current and potential patients, readers, viewers, and stakeholders who engage via social media. Integrating messaging tools that target both audience character and its greatly expanded numbers into the academic health center communications strategy is an important component of a progressive and practical business strategy.

Balanced with the realities of social media, new communications tools are and will continue to grow as an important element in health care. Investments in social media can be substantial or incrementally controlled, but communications investment is crucial to an academic health center's effectiveness as health system reform transpires and healthcare delivery structures are transformed. Social media tools, integrated with other communications tools, offer multiple ways to

promote academic health centers, provide accurate and useful information to communities, and expand healthcare accessibility and effectiveness for patients.

As underscored by thought-leaders at the Annual Meeting, incorporating a strong communications, community outreach, and messaging plan into its business strategy is a key step for academic health centers. AAHC will continue to serve as a resource as academic health centers develop, review, and expand their communications strategies to take advantage of and become leaders in the changing healthcare environment. By providing peer-to-peer networking resources for academic health center leaders to connect—whether at meetings or during crises, sharing experiences, collaborating on responses, or developing best practices to attain practical outcomes—AAHC looks forward, as always, to working closely with its members.

Endnotes

¹ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. In Changing News Landscape, Even Television is Vulnerable: Trends in News Consumption: 1991-2012. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center; 2011. <http://www.people-press.org/2012/09/27/about-the-media-consumption-survey-data/> (accessed October 25, 2012).

² Miller, C., K. Purcell, and T. Rosenstiel. 72% of Americans Follow Local News Closely. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center; 2012. <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Local-news-enthusiasts/Part-1/Overview.aspx> (accessed October 24, 2012).

³ Rosenstiel, T., A. Mitchell, K. Purcell, and L. Rainie. How People Learn About Their Local Community. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center; 2011. <http://pewresearch.org/docs/?DocID=140&src=prc-headline> (accessed October 24, 2012).

⁴ Wartman, SA, ed. Confluence of Policy and Leadership in Academic Health Science Centers: A professional and personal guide. London: Radcliffe Publishing Ltd.; 2012:143.

Highlights and presentations from the meeting are available on the AAHC website (www.aahcdc.org).



Association of Academic Health Centers®
Leading institutions that serve society

VISION

To advance health and well-being through the vigorous leadership of academic health centers.

MISSION

To mobilize and enhance the strengths and resources of the academic health center enterprise in health professions education, patient care, and research.

1400 Sixteenth Street, NW, Suite 720
Washington, DC 20036
202.265.9600
202.265.7514 fax
www.aahcdc.org

For more information, contact the Association of Academic Health Centers.