Social media have taken hold beyond the blogosphere, becoming viable business tools for companies big and small. While many industries have embraced social media, the healthcare field, it seems, has been slower to join the party.

Healthcare media trends blogger Ed Bennett (http://ebennett.org/hsnl/) has identified 557 U.S. hospitals using social networking tools, including 254 YouTube channels, 336 Facebook pages, 430 Twitter accounts and 70 blogs as of February 2010. Bennett follows social media networking trends through his informal research, which involves searching for U.S. hospitals’ official presence on social networking Web sites (excluding unofficial sites such as those established by patients or hospital staff members’ personal accounts). The 557 hospitals identified by Bennett make up just 9.58 percent of U.S. hospitals.

Hospitals already using social media report benefits in areas such as recruitment, community relationship building and patient satisfaction. To examine these and other benefits, including best practices from industries outside healthcare, ACHE presented the program “Best Practices for Applying Social Media in Healthcare.” Funded in part by the Fund for Innovation in Healthcare Leadership, it was held in San Antonio last November in conjunction with the San Antonio Cluster (see sidebar about the Fund, page 38).

The program’s keynote speaker, Matthew Holt, co-founder of the Health 2.0 Conference and founder and author of The Health Care Blog (www.thehealthcareblog.com), started the program with an overview of social media and its rising impact on the healthcare field. Holt referred to social media as part of Web 2.0—what he described as “social software and lightweight tools that promote collaboration between stakeholders.”

Holt described the Web 2.0 phenomenon as a change in online technology and the way it is used. Since Internet usage took hold in the 1990s, there has been a shift from a content management function to a more social platform, which emerged between 2005 and 2007 with blogs, video and content sharing, wikis (Web sites that allow users to make content changes and contributions, such as Wikipedia) and more.

Patients aren’t just coming online to search for health information anymore, said Holt—they are turning online to interact with others about healthcare. Patients, for example, are going online and learning from other patients who may share similar disease states. And they are going online to give their opinions about a healthcare organization’s services.

“For organizations that like to control what is out there about them, this is a fundamental change,” said Holt.
Best Practices From Other Industries

Comcast Corporation

Holt turned the program over to a group of nonhealthcare-industry panelists who showcased how they are using social media in a variety of business arenas.

Comcast Corporation has a lot of customers to serve, with 23.6 million cable, 15.9 million high-speed Internet and 7.6 million Comcast Digital Voice customers nationwide. And, as most businesses know, there is always room for improvement when it comes to customer service. Frank Eliason, director of Digital Care for Comcast, said the Philadelphia-headquartered corporation turned to social media as a way to change its customer service approach. The company was finding that customers were going online to air their grievances about cable service issues and other complaints, including an impassioned, anti-Comcast blog titled “Comcastmustdie.”

Comcast began reaching out to its customers in the online arena by answering bloggers’ concerns. The company now has dedicated customer service team members who search social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Google Blogs to see what its customers are saying about the company and the service it provides. “One of the best ways to listen to customers is via social media,” said Eliason. Comcast also responds to its customers via social media.

For example, if a customer tweets that he is having a problem with his cable service, one of Eliason’s team members will tweet back: “Hey, can I help?” A connection to the customer—and eventually a solution to a problem—is found. “In this space, it is always about customer service,” said Eliason. “It’s about connecting with people.” Comcast also has its own Twitter page devoted to customer care (http://twitter.com/comcastcares).

“...that’s not social at all. It’s all about the personal connection.”

—Randy Goldberg, Hyatt Corporation

Hyatt Corporation

Randy Goldberg, vice president of recruiting, North American Operations, for Chicago-based Hyatt Corporation, discussed how the 90,000-employee organization has found success with social media on the recruiting side. With 424 properties in 45 countries, Hyatt needed a strategy for rolling out the organization’s new employment brand to a wide audience.

The company now uses a variety of social media platforms such as Facebook fan pages, where Hyatt employees respond to prospective employees from all over the world about their careers at Hyatt and what it’s like to work there. Hyatt also uses LinkedIn for more traditional recruiting purposes, Goldberg said.

In addition, Hyatt has a YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/user/hyattcareers) where it posts informational videos about what it’s like to work for the company. “A three-minute video can do much more than I can do in a couple of hours,” said Goldberg.

To Goldberg, using social media is less about simply pushing out information and more about building relationships. “If you think you can just send out information, that’s not what this is about,” he said. “That’s not social at all. It’s all about the personal connection.”

Best Practices in Healthcare

Healthcare organizations are starting to reap many of the same benefits of social media as businesses in other industries, from hospital CEOs’ blogs to innovative patient-physician interaction to a vital, reliable form of communication in emergency situations. A panel of representatives from three hospitals across the country shared their best practices with attendees.
Jewish Hospital

“I didn’t know what social media was all about 10 months ago,” said Marty Bonick, FACHE, president/CEO of Jewish Hospital in Louisville, Ky., a 575-licensed-bed facility. “E-mail was new once—the world is changing, and we need to keep up with it.”

One of the hospital’s first forays into social media was through a CEO blog written by Bonick titled “Hospital Life.” The blog is intended as a way to connect with the community Jewish Hospital serves and is a vital tool in the hospital’s ability to be transparent, Bonick said.

He was inspired to start a blog after reading Paul Levy’s (president and CEO, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston) popular “Running a Hospital” blog. While readership of Bonick’s blog started off slowly at first, it has gained momentum and is now linked to a Twitter account, which has helped drive readership. The Twitter account had more than 800 followers at press time.

As CEO, Bonick also uses social media as a way to connect with staff. “It’s a way to break down the walls and that administrative ‘us versus them’ mentality,” he said. Bonick is Facebook friends with physicians at the hospital. He also lets his employees friend him, but as a policy does not send friend requests to employees.

The hospital also has a Twitter page and has seen growth in its Facebook page. “People who join [these sites] can become ambassadors for the company,” Bonick said.

Fund for Innovation in Healthcare Leadership

“Best Practices for Applying Social Media in Healthcare” was funded in part by the Foundation of the American College of Healthcare Executives’ (ACHE’s) philanthropic initiative, the Fund for Innovation in Healthcare Leadership.

Upcoming Fund programs for 2010 include “The Digital Medicine Revolution in Healthcare,” which will be offered at ACHE’s Atlanta Cluster on Sept. 14, and the ethics program, “Ethical Wisdom: Doing the Right Thing Every Day, Everywhere in the Organization,” which will be offered at the San Francisco Cluster on Oct. 6. (See page 103 for more information.)

The Fund was established in 2006 to bring innovation to the forefront of healthcare leadership. In its commitment to developing future leaders, the Fund also has provided scholarships for ACHE’s Senior Executive and Executive Programs. Since the Fund’s inception, more than 850 generous donors have made contributions. This support has enabled the Fund to strengthen the field of healthcare leadership by providing educational opportunities on important trends and issues.

For more information on the Fund, including ways to contribute, please visit ache.org/Innovation or contact Laura Wilkinson, assistant director, Development, at (312) 424-9305 or lwilkinson@ache.org.

The Methodist Hospital

The Methodist Hospital in Houston, a 950-bed facility that is part of the Methodist Hospital System, is using a variety of social media both as internal tools among staff members and externally in efforts to reach out to patients and the community at large.

The hospital’s executive vice president, Marc Boom, MD, FACHE, hosts a blog where employees can post questions or comments. Boom answers the questions...
with the help of Methodist’s communications staff.

Methodist also hosts external blogs for the community, including a weight management blog. “We have a patient blogger—a volunteer—and it’s very motivating,” said Clare Rose, FACHE, vice president of operations at Methodist Hospital.

Hospital marketing and communications department staff send tweets via Twitter approximately two to three times a day. According to Rose, two-thirds of the tweets are health news and about one-third are hospital promotions. The hospital’s approximately 900 Twitter followers include patients, members of the media and employees.

“We were tweeting several months before flu season, and we got a lot of good publicity because we were out there,” said Rose.

The hospital also uses a Facebook page to promote services and community events and to provide healthcare expertise. It also hosts a volunteer services Facebook page that maintains contact with its Caring Teens Group—a group of teenagers who volunteer for the hospital in the summer. In addition, Methodist has a Center for Liver Disease and Transplant Facebook page that provides information for transplant patients, including news, patient stories and videos.

Other social media used by Methodist include promotional advertisements and education videos on YouTube. In addition, the hospital is developing an online, interactive breast imaging center using Second Life software. The site will enable women to virtually experience breast procedures such as biopsies and mammograms so they know what to expect in real life. In addition, it will provide breast health information to patients.

Rose views social media as less of an option and more of a requirement. “If you’re not out there, they’re talking about you anyway,” she said. “Social media is here to stay, so not doing it is not an option.”

**Innovis Health**

Innovis Health in Fargo, N.D., had a plan to eventually move into social media. But when the Fargo-Moorhead Flood struck the area in spring 2009, that plan was quickly put into action.

As President Obama declared a state of emergency in the area, many of the local hospitals began evacuating. “Innovis was left to take care of the region,” described Kevin Pitzer, chief administrative officer. “Social media needed to be brought to the forefront to enable us to handle that.”

With cell phone networks in the area down, online communication became a vital tool. In less than two hours, a team of Innovis staff members (“talented staff who had been early social media adopters themselves,” said Pitzer) had everything up and running, including a Facebook page, a Twitter account and a blog. Using these tools, the hospital was able to communicate with patients’ families, staff, emergency authorities, the media, volunteers and the public in general. The hospital was able to convey patient safety and provide service access information, route accessibility, remote clinic closings and hours, and more. “We were able to assure folks that the hospital was still up and running, and we were able to continue serving the community,” said Pitzer.

An early tweet on March 27, 2009, read, “We are fully operating, fully staffed and open to serve the community. We have no plans to evacuate at this time.”

Innovis is still using the social media tools it set up to handle the flood crisis across the organization in other ways. In addition to emergency management, the tools are being used for recruitment, employee relations, marketing of the hospital’s brand and service lines and patient relations.

Just a few short months after the flood, one of Innovis’ wellness tweets showed a more lighthearted, but effective, use of Twitter: “Make your life better: move more. Use stairs if you have the chance, walk your dog, chase your kids or mow the lawn. Happy 4th of July!”

Jessica D. Squazzo is a writer with Healthcare Executive.