

# NET GAINS

Can the Web serve to strengthen the relationship between doctors and patients? New data from the Accel Report II suggests that it can. **By Risa Bernstein.**

A great deal has been written by, and for, the healthcare marketing community about physicians' growing use of the Internet and its impact on how they diagnose and treat their patients. Surveys have documented the number of hours per week that doctors spend online, while more and more information has become available about what they are doing while they're connected.

Conversely, patients' growing use of the Internet as a channel for health self-education is also well documented: Numerous reports corroborate findings that "information about health" is consistently the number one reason that patients search online. But, to date, precious little has been written on the topic of how doctors are using the Internet *with* patients to both enhance the doctor/patient interaction and increase the level of patient care. To that end, Accel Healthcare Communications conducted an online survey of

**90%**

of doctors have patients bringing them information from the Internet

**51%**

of doctors would offer promotional materials directing patients to certain Web sites

**72%**

of doctors encourage their patients to use the Internet



physicians. The aim was to assess the physicians' current perception of the Internet as a tool for strengthening interactions with patients, and its promise for actually enhancing patient care, as well as physicians' ideas about resolving unmet patient communication needs. Our findings are comprised in the Accel Report II. This article contains highlights from the report and focuses on the implications of five key findings, with particular emphasis on what healthcare marketers can do about them.

For the majority of physicians, information they find online has an impact on their prescription decisions. Recently, we have seen physicians begin to expand their online repertoire, engage in more interactive activities, and refer patients to Web sites. Still, there is a lot of physician resistance to the use of the Internet, mainly due to concerns such as reimbursement, medical records privacy, malpractice liability, and the impersonalization of care.

## 5 OFFERINGS TO CONSIDER

While a wide and ever-increasing range of Internet offerings exists, the ideal mix for any given brand depends on several factors, including the level of financial investment, the physician audience's interest, and the degree of patient Internet literacy. Given the multidimensional nature of these issues, partnering with strategic planners and technology innovators will become more and more critical for pharmaceutical companies looking to break through the clutter. The following five offerings are examples of the tactics that could (and should) be considered by every brand manager.

1. General health and therapeutic area-specific Internet search guides (with or without commentary, critiques, and/or thought leader, or other third-party endorsements).

2. Waiting room posters promoting recommended Web sites for general health or specific therapeutic categories.

3. Mini CD-ROMs with general health and therapeutic area-specific digital directories (with or without links to live Web sites, search engines, and/or desktop note pads for capturing questions for physicians).

4. Physician Advisory Boards that develop and review Web content, borrowing from the publication planning and slide kit development model.

5. "Read what your doctor is reading" series containing peer-reviewed physician publications (with or without annotation) or search guides for patients that link to popular physician sites.

For most patients, the information they find online impacts on how they manage their overall health, improves their compliance with prescribed treatments, and affects how they communicate with their doctors. While there is a reasonably good base of patient resources available on the Internet, there is clearly room for improvement. For example, patients want to be able to schedule appointments, ask questions, refill prescriptions and receive diagnostic test results over the Internet.

Both physicians and patients have, in the big picture, settled comfortably into their respective online niches. However, we are just beginning to see a movement of physicians and patients utilizing the Internet together as a relationship-enhancing tool.

Currently, it is those patients who are bringing information from the Internet and asking for their doctors' opinions that are driving most of this activity. So far, doctors have been the more passive participants in the exchange. However, by not driving their patients to particular Web sites that they favor, doctors are missing an opportunity to proactively harness the power of the Internet to enhance and augment their patient care.

One key objective of the Accel Report II survey was to find out why doctors have been slow to get involved in this emerging trend in comprehensive patient care. We wanted to probe physicians' willingness to embrace the Web as a patient care tool, their openness to receiving those tools via the pharmaceutical sales rep, and their ideas for new tools that they feel would help them in their efforts.

The focus of the report and this article is the role of the Internet in enhancing the doctor/patient relationship. The following are five key findings that will resonate with medical marketers and educators, and should be considered in the context of larger marketing strategies:

## FINDING #1

**The Internet is a catalyst for improving the physician/patient relationship.**

Nearly 80% of physicians found that the doctor/patient interaction has changed due to the Net. Of these, 60% feel the change is for the better, the primary reason being increased access to information. 18% say the change is for the worse because, in their words, "patients misinterpret information or get false information from Web sites promoting their own agendas" and "patients have stopped taking necessary medications based on bad information found on the Web."

## FINDING #2

**Physicians are judiciously leveraging the Internet as a tool for educating patients.**

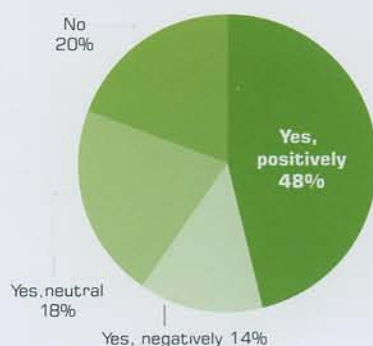
72% of physicians encourage their patients to use the Internet. They are recommending it for disease research (53%), specific Web sites (51%) and drug research (37%). Importantly, before recommending a Web site to their patients, physicians consider whether the site has a balanced view-

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**65%** of doctors think drug companies can be credible sources of disease information online

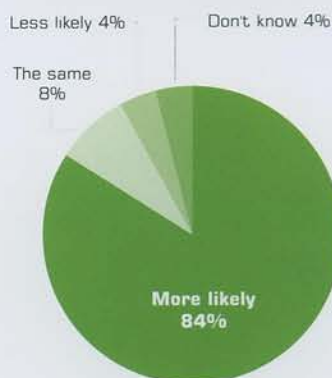


### Has the Internet changed the doctor/patient relationship?



Source: Accel Healthcare Communications

### Over the next 5 years, are physicians more or less likely to recommend the Web to patients as an educational tool?



Source: Accel Healthcare Communications

### Would physicians offer promotional materials that would direct patients to certain Web sites?

Yes	51%
No	30%
Don't know	19%

Source: Accel Healthcare Communications



### Would physicians like to receive Web resource guides to help patients search for specific information?

Yes	59%
No	10%
Don't know	24%
Already exist	7%

Source: Accel Healthcare Communications

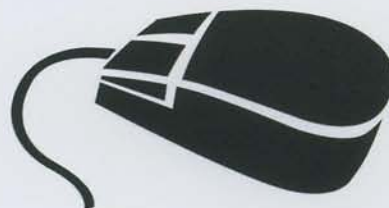
## 74%

of doctors would not recommend to their patients any Web site that required registration or membership fees

### Dos and Don'ts for marketers

Blazing a new trail often calls for a certain degree of trial and error. However, you are not starting from scratch. The following are some general guidelines based on the experiences of early adopters who have already begun to leverage the Internet as a tool to enhance the doctor/patient relationship.

- ✓ **DO INTEGRATE** your online offerings closely with offline capabilities currently used to reach physicians and their patients.
- ✓ **DO TAKE** the new products directly to the physicians, gain their buy-in during the development phase, and train them in how to use them to maximize success.
- ✓ **DO PROVIDE** compelling data on the tool's effectiveness.
- ✓ **DO GIVE** physicians tools for promoting Web sites they want their patients to visit — such as Internet directories and guides — to help ensure the quality of the information exchange.
- ✓ **DO STRIKE** a balance between altruism and blatant self-interest by offering tools that provide real value to physicians and patients, yet still have room for your messages.
- ✓ **DO BE OUT IN FRONT** of the pack and be the first to gain physicians' and patients' trust and loyalty, and confer that benefit to your reps.
- ✗ **DON'T VIEW** the Internet as a separate and distinct marketing channel.
- ✗ **DON'T DEVELOP** new online offerings for physicians in a silo.
- ✗ **DON'T EXPECT** physicians to "take your word for it."
- ✗ **DON'T LEAVE** physicians to their own devices when it comes to recommending quality Web sites to their patients.
- ✗ **DON'T INVEST** in tools that make your audience happy but don't deliver any value to you.
- ✗ **DON'T DELAY.**



# 69%

of doctors are in favor of having patient materials on Web sites designed for physicians



## THE ROLE OF THE REP

The first Accel Report looked at recent changes in the physician-rep relationship and put forth recommendations for pharmaceutical companies looking to enhance their field force's value to physicians.

Actively facilitating the physician/patient relationship is one additional way the rep can add value to the physician — providing the rep is focused on the doctor's interest in improving patient care, rather than solely on the products he or she sells. For instance, reps can:

- Distribute patient-directed "online search guides" compliments of their respective companies in relevant therapeutic categories.
- Invite doctors to participate in conferences and conduct real time reviews and ratings of sites for third-party validation.
- "Survey" doctors to gain insights into how their colleagues are currently using the Internet with patients, and collect the feedback for further analysis.

These tactics can give reps extended access to dialogue and relationship building with physicians because they are inherently interesting and provide a true "value add" experience in the sales call. This type of open communication between the doctor and the rep can result in a mutual trust and respect. In an era in which reps scramble for scarce time for drug detailing, online offerings can allow pharmaceutical companies to differentiate themselves in the minds of the physicians. Collectively, all these advantages can have a very real impact on the top and bottom lines.

point (72%), breadth of information (53%), editorial independence (47%), and a professional section they themselves visit (40%). 74% would not recommend a site that required registration or membership fees.

## FINDING #3

### Patients are bringing information from the Internet to their doctors.

90% of physicians reported that they have patients bringing them information they have found on the Internet. Of these, 88% are seeing disease information, while 83% are seeing drug information resulting from the patients' efforts. While this type of increased involvement in their own healthcare by patients is a clear and well-documented trend, the credibility of the information is less clear. Physicians are split between believing this information comes from credible sources. Interestingly, 65% think drug companies can be credible sources of disease information on the Internet.

## FINDING #4

### Physicians expect and embrace increasingly frequent online interactions with patients.

85% think that, over the next five years, physicians will be more likely

to recommend the use of the Web as an educational tool for their patients. Notably, 82% of these physicians look forward to this shift. Leading drivers making doctor/patient communications over the Web more mainstream include more credible content on the Internet (27%), funding from the industry for Web-base programs (25%), and a more tech-savvy generation (24%).

## FINDING #5

### Physicians welcome industry-sponsored tools that will help them facilitate a better quality experience for their patients online, and they would be willing to receive those tools through reps.

Beyond the increased frequency of physician/patient online interactions, the scope of the relationship will also grow in the near future, with physicians taking advantage of tools that make patient education convenient and comprehensive. More than half the physicians polled indicated an interest in receiving Web resource guides to assist them in making quality recommendations to patients (59%), as well as a willingness to offer patient promotional materials that would direct them to certain Web sites (51%). Physicians and patients will increasingly find themselves visiting the same sites. In fact, 69% favor having patients materials on Web sites designed for physicians.

## CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that the Internet could be used to a greater extent to increase and improve communications between doctors and their patients. However, just as the doctor/sales rep relationship builds incrementally, the doctor/patient (online) relationship will also evolve over time. We have already begun to see previously taboo health topics, such as depression and erectile dysfunction, make their way into doctor/patient discussions. This newfound openness, which paves the way for better treatment and health, is attributable, at least in part, to the Internet and its role as facilitator in the doctor/patient relationship.

The link is clear: good information leads to better choices, which ultimately leads to better health. Why shouldn't physicians take a more active role in helping the patients navigate better through the wide world of online health? Innovative, net-savvy health care marketers will surely recognize the multitude of opportunities that lay within this virtually untapped arena. ■



Risa Bernstein is chairman of Accel Healthcare Communications. Lisbeth Klau, group account supervisor, also contributed to the article. To download the complete Accel Report II, go to [www.accelhealth.com](http://www.accelhealth.com). She can be reached at (646) 602-6900.

**59%** of doctors would be interested in Web resource guides to help them recommend sites