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Harnessing the Power of Social Media in GI

Dr. Buch:

How should we be harnessing the power of social media in GI? This is *GI Insights* on ReachMD. I'm your host, Dr. Peter Buch. Here to discuss this compelling topic is Dr. Benjamin Schmidt. Dr. Schmidt is a gastroenterologist at Esse Health in St. Louis, Missouri. His article, titled "How a GI Fellow Found a Following: Harnessing the Power of Social Media for Education and Fun," was published in *Digestive Diseases and Sciences* in 2023.

Welcome to the program, Dr. Schmidt.

Dr. Schmidt:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Buch:

It is truly a pleasure. Dr. Schmidt, let's start at the beginning of your social media journey. Why do you feel it's important that healthcare professionals understand the power of social media?

Dr. Schmidt:

I think it's become clear that over the past three to four years, especially, that social media is here to stay, and it's more than just a casual thing to do to kill some time on the side. It's becoming a way that people get their information and people spread information, whether that's for good or for their own gain, so I think it's really, really important for us to get in and for people to be able to make it what they want, so it's not any longer something to just do frivolous things with. Other people are using it, so we should use it, too. We meaning physicians or anyone else out there in the healthcare field looking to spread an important message. So overall, I think it's precisely because it's so powerful that it's important for us to understand it and know how to use it properly.

Dr. Buch:

And with so many social media sites, why did you decide to use TikTok as your platform?

Dr. Schmidt:

That wasn't as calculated a decision as one might think. It was a product of where we were in the pandemic when I started joining social media and trying to build my following. I started the Doc Schmidt platforms way back in October of 2020, and that was in the height of the second wave of the pandemic, and it was at a time where TikTok was really taking off because of the pandemic, really—a lot of people stuck inside with nothing better to do—so I had been messing around with it in the sense of consuming content on TikTok for the prior five to six months while stuck at home in between shifts at the hospital while I was in residency and then fellowship, and I started thinking about making my own content. And TikTok, I think, has the advantage of having probably the strongest viral potential of any of the social media platforms, and what I mean by that is someone without a following, without any background in social media has the highest potential to just make one video and get lucky and have that video do really, really well. So this wasn't necessarily a calculated decision at the time, but looking back it was the right platform to join just because of how volatile TikTok is, meaning that it has the potential to really make someone take off in a very short amount of time, and that's what I was fortunate to have happen. First with silly skits, but then also with actual educational content in both the GI internal medicine and just healthcare worlds in general. And using that volatile aspect of TikTok, I was able to grow very quickly, and then use that success to try to pull my audience to other platforms, meaning other social media platforms, like Instagram, YouTube, and even Twitter and Facebook and continue to grow and spread my messages over there.

Dr. Buch:

And in follow-up to that, can you tell us a little bit about the demographic of each one of these platforms?

Dr. Schmidt:

I think that's a very important thing to consider as well because the demographics of each of these platforms I've been discussing vary dramatically. So TikTok, as you can imagine, is typically a younger audience in that just the older generations aren't as familiar with TikTok since it's so new, so definitely, my audience personally on TikTok is a much younger audience, and it probably leans more towards patients rather than other physicians or other healthcare professionals.

For me Instagram is the flipside of that. From a professional standpoint, I think the majority of my Instagram followers tend to be physicians or healthcare trainees. Medical students use Instagram very consistently and even pre-med students, and then residents and fellows represent a big portion there. I think Instagram is still younger overall but a slightly older audience than on TikTok.

YouTube is probably the most diverse audience since I think YouTube is now being used by a lot of people almost as a substitute for television, so they're people that are just looking for entertainment of any type on YouTube, so I think it's the most diverse, probably with definitely a lot of healthcare professionals on there but a lot of patients as well just looking to learn or looking to just have some entertainment, whether that's healthcare-related or otherwise.

Twitter, I think, is probably the most academic and skews a little bit older as well. Academic meaning, I think that was the first social media that was really accepted by academic medicine as something that was acceptable and not taboo to be on and actually important to be on to try to network and interact with other professionals around the country and even around the world. So for me that's very few patients that I interact with on Twitter. That's almost exclusively on the healthcare side, and that skews a little bit older.

And then Facebook, of course, the stereotype is definitely an older audience. I think the younger generations have abandoned Facebook, so it's more of the older generations there.

The other thing that's very interesting, the demographics of gender vary significantly throughout the different platforms. For me on TikTok and Instagram, I have a significant portion leaning towards female as opposed to male on YouTube is the predominant one. I don't really have a great explanation for that other than just the users of those platforms I think skew in those directions on the gender scale.

Dr. Buch:

Thank you very much for that useful information. What advice would you give to those in the audience who are interested in strengthening their social media presence?

Dr. Schmidt:

I think that's a very challenging thing to do, and there's a lot of trial and error, honestly, that's involved in building a social media following and trying to grow on social media. So I think the most important thing is to not be afraid to fail, so to speak, and have content or posts that don't do well, aren't seen by a lot of people. Ultimately, the way to be successful, I think, on social media is to find your niche, find your interest and your way of discussing that interest as well in a way that's going to connect with an audience. It's most important to find an audience that's going to really enjoy your content and really stick with it and look for the next piece of content that you're going to be making. Naturally, the instinct, I think, for a lot of people is to make the broadest piece of content that they can in the sense of something that will appeal to anyone who's going to watch it, which makes sense intuitively, but the problem is there's so much content in the social media sphere now that it just would become white noise if you make it too broad, but by being someone who narrows in on a specific niche, you can find an audience that's more interested in what you're following, and that can help you grow. When I say a specific niche, I mean in the sense of maybe even within a specialty content where it's aimed at patients versus if you're going to be aimed more at physicians. Knowing your audience is going to help you make your content. You don't always have to stick with that, but I think having that consistency is going to be helpful initially.

Dr. Buch:

I saw some of your original humor, and what struck me as very funny was that you did one with being on-call for days on end. I found that extremely funny.

There are numerous sites out there with similar information. How do you build and maintain a following?

Dr. Schmidt:

It's definitely challenging to do. Building a following I think is one of the hardest things to do on social media because, as you alluded to, there's so much content out there and there's so many places for people to spend their time, so again, I think the importance is to find content that you're passionate about and find a way to present it that you're going to enjoy creating, but also that people are going to enjoy consuming because I could make three different videos, for instance, about, let's say, hepatic encephalopathy, and they can be

geared towards completely different audiences. I could make three videos where one's towards patients, one is towards healthcare trainees, and one is towards transplant hepatologists, but then even within that there's three other ways where I could make one where it's a skit and it has a humorous tilt to it but still providing information about how to treat or how to recognize hepatic encephalopathy versus just sitting, staring at the camera and talking about hepatic encephalopathy versus actually standing up next to a white board and writing out the pathways that explain the pathophysiology of hepatic encephalopathy. And those three different audiences and those three different ways of presenting the content will be received very differently.

Dr. Buch:

For those just tuning in, you're listening to *GI Insights* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Peter Buch, and I'm speaking with Dr. Schmidt about social media and GI.

So what have you learned about the potential downside of utilizing social media?

Dr. Schmidt:

Social media is a powerful tool, but that also makes it a dangerous one. So there's a lot of ways that it can be used poorly, and I think sometimes that's malicious and sometimes that's unintentional. In the sense of healthcare professionals going out and making their own social media content, I think the classic pitfall to avoid is, of course, HIPAA violations. If you're talking about patients, you need to take proper precautions to protect privacy and confidentiality.

I think with any hobby, the social media can sometimes be a little bit consuming, especially compared to other hobbies even. It's an all-consuming thing where people can get, for lack of a better word, addicted to it and neglect other responsibilities. I think that's been a big challenge for me that I've been trying to compartmentalize my social media from my professional responsibilities and from my personal life and my family as well.

And then the most important potential downfall of social media is the people that are looking to cause harm maliciously. And when I say that in the healthcare space specifically, I mean those spreading misinformation or disinformation about a variety of topics in healthcare. That's the dark side of social media, I think, and it's a big part of why I joined and why I stay on social media is to try to dispel a lot of rumors or myths that are discussed on there. And I think fighting this information and fighting people that are trying to wreak havoc just for its own sake.

Dr. Buch:

So as we come to the end of our discussion, are there any other thoughts that you'd like to share with our audience today?

Dr. Schmidt:

I think the big takeaway is that you shouldn't be afraid of social media or intimidated by social media just because it's such a big, powerful entity now. I think it can be made into what any one of us want it to be. You don't have to post videos of you dancing, for example, if you're going on TikTok. That was the old joke when I would tell people that I was starting to make content on TikTok. They always assumed I was making TikTok dances or doing silly things like that, and I think that the reason that now it's become almost commonplace for doctors to be on TikTok or on Instagram or YouTube is precisely because of a select few that we're brave enough to start doing it. But I think everybody should have a working understanding of social media just so you can have the ability to combat misinformation or understand the direction that our society is going because a lot of our new information is exchanged on social media. So even if you're not interested in creating content, I think it's worth at least understanding these different platforms and what they represent, the content that circulates on them, so that you can help your patients and even your friends and family navigate the different information that they're going to encounter.

Dr. Buch:

I want to thank my guest, Dr. Benjamin Schmidt, for this timely and important discussion. Dr. Schmidt, I really enjoyed our conversation today.

Dr. Schmidt:

Thank you. It was a great time. I appreciate you having me on.

Dr. Buch:

For ReachMD, I'm Dr. Peter Buch. To access this and other episodes in this series, visit ReachMD.com/GIInsights where you can Be Part of the Knowledge. Thanks for listening and looking forward to learning with you next time.