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Shift Happens: The Science Behind Three of 2016's Top Health Care Marketing Trends

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Categories: [More Disruption Please](#), [Patient Engagement](#)

As a medical provider, you're entrusted with helping patients improve their health—but what about supporting the health of your practice? In the world of ever-evolving patient and provider communications, that means connecting with patients in ways that make the most of new technologies and communication channels.

While the means of communication may be new, the impulses behind them are far from it. It's essential to consider patient communications through the lens of consumer behavior—behavior rooted in biology—in order to navigate rapidly changing technology.

He's just not that into you

In evolutionary biology, signaling theory examines communication between individuals. The idea has been adapted in psychology to explore the role of nonverbal signals such as body language and pheromones in our interactions.

Typically, we think of such signals as in-person events. But when a patient's first encounter with your practice is online, what messages are you sending? We're increasingly turning to the web for signals; in a 2013 Pew Research study, 77% of online health seekers said that they began their last session at a search engine.^[1] And as social networks such as Facebook increase their search functionality this year, they'll become more and more common jumping-off points for those seeking medical information.

So what does this mean for your practice? Imagine a prospective patient's first online encounter—say, through Facebook search. Ideally, when prospective patients find your practice, they'll encounter all the positive reviews and peer referrals you've collected (or are about to start collecting as soon as you finish reading this blogpost). They'll see welcoming images, get clear information, and find easy ways to schedule appointments.

Welcome to Herd Mentality! Population: Nearly everyone

Emergence theory—more specifically herd behavior—centers on the complex ways that herds, without any formal design, dictate collective decision making from migratory patterns to defense against predators. Humans, of course, are no strangers to herd behavior. A University of Leeds study, for example, found that the movement of only 5% of a crowd can influence the crowd's direction as a whole.^[2]

Herd behavior doesn't disappear online. As in "real life," we're swayed by the actions, both subtle and overt, of others—and of the group as a whole. The first peer-reviewed medical journal coverage on this phenomenon appeared in *JAMA* in 2014. Of the quarter of patients who reported using online reviews when selecting a doctor, 35% selected a doctor because of a good online rating, while 37% avoided doctors with poor ratings.^[3]

The study also found that respondents took into account the group's aggregate opinion of providers as much as they did individual reviews, and valued more recent information from the herd more highly. Eighty percent said they were seeking providers with an average rating of at least four out of five stars, and 75% saw reviews over 12 months old as less credible than more current reviews. The takeaway for medical practices: Patient reviews matter, both individually and in the aggregate. They should be current, positive, and easy for prospective patients to find and evaluate.

It is not the strongest of the species that survives but the most adaptable

In evolution, natural selection describes how variations in heritable traits affect the survival of populations over time. It's a popular metaphor in capitalism, where we see principles of variation, selection, and

replication in how businesses change and succeed.

As you think about how your practice can evolve and prosper in a Web 3.0 world, consider a basic success indicator: demand. One fundamental way to take advantage of demand signals is to offer prospective patients the ability to express demand as easily as possible, using the tools that they prefer most.

Take scheduling. A recent Accenture survey found that 77% of patients want to be able to “self-schedule” medical appointments online. Already, 38% of all medical appointments are booked after hours, most through digital channels. The Accenture team predicts that by 2019, 64% of patients will schedule appointments digitally, and 80% of appointment volume will be self-scheduled.^[4] Practices that want to survive—and thrive—need to adapt to attract customers and accommodate the evolving nature of demand.

The common thread is this: Successful interaction with patients through any kind of technology means foregrounding fundamental human needs. The better your tools can help you meet those needs, the more your practice—and your patients—can thrive.

To learn more about how Demandforce can help medical practices attract and engage patients, build and manage their online reputations, and save time, visit www.demandforce.com

[1] Pew Internet & American Life Project, [Health Online 2013](#), January 2013.

[2] FuturePundit, [“5% Can Influence Movement Direction Of Crowds,”](#) February 2008.

[3] JAMA Network, [“Study Examines Public Awareness, Use of Online Physician Rating Sites,”](#) February 2014.

[4] Accenture, [“Patient Engagement: Digital self-scheduling set to explode,”](#) 2016.

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