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Abstract

Women of childbearing age, especially in industrialized nations, are using social media in record numbers and are seeking information about pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding online. Social media is a form of communication that enables online communities to share ideas, information, and personal messages. Those providing support to breastfeeding mothers are uniquely equipped to share information, guidance, and encouragement with new mothers. Lactation professionals, advocates, and volunteers should be aware that mothers are using Web-based communication to gain information about breastfeeding. Those who support breastfeeding mothers can also learn to use these methods to engage with the breastfeeding community online. Regardless of the chosen platform, social media is most successful when it promotes engagement with a target audience. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and Pinterest are identified as useful platforms for connecting with breastfeeding mothers.

Keywords

blog, breastfeeding, engagement, Facebook, lactation, Pinterest, social media, Twitter

Background

Around the world, the rise of digital connectivity is changing the way people communicate. In industrialized nations, social media has become a dominant form of communication, especially for pregnant and new mothers. Ninety-three percent¹ of the “Millennial Generation” (those born after 1982, who have come of age in a time of dependence upon technology) are communicating online, and in the United States, for example, nearly 3 of 4 are using a social networking Website, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest.² More than half of all women responding to one survey expressed their intention to share their birth experience, as it happens, on social media.³ Moreover, time online increases after the birth—44% of US women spend more time online after a new baby is born—and the likelihood that a new mother will seek breastfeeding information and support online is high.⁴

Research indicates that health care providers continue to be the “first choice for most people with health concerns, but online resources, including advice from peers, are a significant source of health information in the United States.”⁵ Eighty percent of US Internet users have sought health care information online, and birth and related topics are an area of focus. Consumers using social media are not only seeking information online, but are sharing their knowledge with others. As connectivity soars through increased Internet access and the rise of the smartphone,⁶ so does altruistic sharing of what mothers learn online.⁷

Those supporting breastfeeding mothers are uniquely equipped to provide information, guidance, and encouragement

to new mothers. Professional organizations, including the United States Breastfeeding Committee, are calling on the International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC) profession to bring evidence-based information to social media.⁸ In 2011, the International Lactation Consultant Association (ILCA) established a blog that received nearly 95,000 page views in its first year.⁹ Numerous individual IBCLCs, professional breastfeeding organizations, and mother-to-mother support organizations now provide information and support through networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Of note, the competing infant formula industry is well versed in the use of Internet-based outreach.^{10,11} Dr. Regina Benjamin, surgeon general of the United States, states in her Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding, “While television and print media remain viable avenues for disseminating public health messages, the increasing use of electronic communication channels opens many new possibilities for promoting breastfeeding. Use of these new social media will require that promoters adapt quickly to changing technology and develop new kinds of messages appropriate to these venues.”¹²

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Many IBCLCs, from private practitioners to those employed by the Special Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants, and Children, are already using Internet-based technology.¹³ Some are using online videoconferencing software to provide services for mothers unable to be seen face-to-face. Others are testing the use of Web-based monitoring systems where mothers can input their breastfeeding data.¹⁴ There are useful smartphone applications for IBCLC practice. We have even seen the use of text messaging to spread wide-reaching information about pregnancy, birth, and early parenthood.^{15,16}

Existing research provides important advice for those involved in breastfeeding support. Women are accessing health care information online to assist with decision making, and health professionals “must learn to work in partnership with women to guide them toward evidence-based Websites and be prepared to discuss the ensuing information.”¹⁷

Getting Started

Assess Your Goals and Target Audience

Although many women of childbearing age today are “digital natives” (meaning they grew up during a time of reliance on technology), many providers of breastfeeding support are “digital immigrants,” adopting new and unfamiliar technologies to better understand and communicate with new mothers. Building effective social media skills is achievable, even for those new to technology! Like all communication efforts, social media use is best approached strategically, whether for a private practice, a statewide organization or advocacy group, or for a health care institution. The planning process should be scaled to the size of your organization and include an assessment of your communication goals, the target audience you intend to reach, and the strategies you will need to effectively engage your audience. Limited resources for communication efforts can be maximized by choosing 1 or 2 platforms that best meet the needs of the practice, group, or organization and by concentrating on strategic outreach. Larger organizations have the capacity to connect over a multitude of platforms.

For example, an IBCLC may use social media to build a private practice and spread evidence-based information about breastfeeding. She/he may select Facebook and/or Pinterest, based on the demographics of the audience and the capacity of those platforms to spread information. A statewide organization may seek to build membership among IBCLCs and raise awareness of current legislative issues. For this organization, the one-on-one networking capacities of Twitter may be the best fit. In groups with multiple working members, social media tools, used internally, can significantly increase communication and productivity, particularly for organizations with leaders, staff, or volunteers that are not co-located.

The 4 Dominant Social Media Platforms

In 2012, 1 of these 4 platforms—or a combination thereof—is most likely to meet the strategic needs of organizations pursuing a social media strategy.

Facebook

- Largest audience of any social media platform, with 845 million users worldwide.¹⁸
- A majority (57%) of users are women.¹⁸
- 71% of users describe themselves as parents.¹⁸

What types of content work well:

- Visual content, such as infographics (research or inspirational messages crafted into eye-catching visuals), tends to increase engagement.
- Videos or pictures.
- Short posts that invite comments, “likes,” or sharing.

Strategies:

- Engage your audience by generating content (called “status updates” on Facebook) and liking, sharing, and commenting on the content others post.
- Establish a Facebook page, which differs from a personal profile. Pages can be established for businesses, organizations, support groups or causes.
- Facebook groups allow for interactive discussions with varying levels of privacy, depending of the type of group established.

Twitter

- Twitter is favored by younger users and is used by one-quarter of Internet users 18-29 years old.¹⁹
- In the United States, 25% of African Americans and 19% of Latinos use Twitter, compared to 9% of whites.¹⁹
- Twitter’s one-on-one networking and organizing capacities favor relationship building.¹⁹

What types of content work well:

- Headline-type messages with links to relevant blog posts or research.
- Content that promotes the work of others and demonstrates your organization’s generosity and willingness to share information.

Strategies:

- Participate in conversations and share information by creating short (140-character) messages called “tweets.”
- Manage the high volume of tweets—more than 400 million tweets are broadcast each day²⁰—by choosing whose content to follow, and by following specific topic areas.
- Learn about relevant Twitter users by searching topic areas, called hashtags, because they are marked with a “#” symbol (#breastfeeding or #IBCLC).
- All tweets are public, but they are most likely to be seen by those who follow you. A tweet also is seen by more people when it is “retweeted,” or forwarded, to other followers.

Blogging

- Eighty-one percent of mothers who use social media report that blogs, more than any other platform, help “build confidence about parenting skills.”²¹
- Sixty-seven percent of mothers report using blogs as a primary source of parenting advice.²¹

What types of content work well:

- Blog posts provide an opportunity for longer-form writing that can be linked to shorter posts in other platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.
- A combination of personal experiences and commentary on current research/information offers a relatable connection for blog audiences.
- Content that includes a strong visual element is more likely to be shared on other platforms.
- Writing should include the use of keywords so that your content will be searchable by major search engines.
- Increase engagement by including an invitation to readers to comment and share the post.
- Check to see which posts are the most read. Understanding your audience will help guide your future posts.

Strategies:

- Consistency is key. Research finds that blogging 2 or 3 times per week is a minimum for building your audience.²²
- Not ready to maintain a blog for your practice or your organization? Other strategies include guest blogging (writing for other blogs) and becoming a content curator (sharing the best of others’ writing).

A blog reader, such as Google Reader, can help you identify and follow other breastfeeding blogs.²³

- Check out Lactation Matters, ILCA’s blog, for a breastfeeding-related example.⁹

Pinterest

- Very high level of engagement with mothers: 80% of users are women,²⁴ and those who are mothers are 61% more likely than those who are not to use the platform.²⁵
- In 2012, Pinterest experienced significant growth in European Union markets.²⁶
- Pinterest is particularly suited to lifestyle connections, including breastfeeding choices.
- Pinterest is driving more traffic to some Websites than Facebook²⁷

What types of content work well:

- Visual content: photos, inspirational quotes, or infographics highlighting research data.
- Visuals from blog posts: if you are creating blog content, be sure to include a strong visual for Pinterest.

Strategies:

- Develop “pinboards” (a page of “pinned” images like photos or videos) on message or strategy areas.
- Add links to the descriptions of your pins to direct users to content such as blog posts or research.

Other Platforms

New social media platforms continue to emerge. Websites such as Google+, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Reddit have users who provide breastfeeding information and advocacy. Each reaches a different population of breastfeeding mothers and professionals. As with all new tools, it is wise for users to explore and determine whether each tool is effective in reaching the intended audience.

Promote Engagement with Your Audience

Regardless of the chosen platform(s)—Facebook, for example—social media is most successful when it promotes engagement with a target audience. Engagement is the process of providing content, such a blog post, commentary on new research, or a provocative image, on a platform with the goal of inspiring participation.²⁸ That participation can happen through commenting, sharing with others, and expressing agreement or disagreement.

Listen to Your Audience

Social media offers a unique opportunity to listen to the needs of your target audience: formally, using free or commercially available monitoring tools; or informally, through reading comments, posts, and tweets. By learning about your audience, you can more effectively craft the content that is likely to spark conversation.

Generosity Is a Core Value of Social Media Communities

Understanding the core values of social media communities is essential to successful online engagement. Effective social media communities demonstrate a spirit of sharing and collaboration in their functioning. Organizations that focus their strategies on sharing quality information and helping others, rather than on self-promotion, will be more likely to build successful networks. One example suggests sharing or promoting the work of others over your own at a ratio of 12 posts of others to 1 of your own creation.²⁹

Observe, Measure, and Budget for Social Media

Identifying others with similar goals who are successfully using your chosen platform(s) and observing their efforts can expose you to ever-evolving strategies and best practices. If you or your organization want to measure your impact, built-in tools to help you analyze your efforts are offered by most platforms, or free third-party tools are available. Incorporating social media into your current workload may be as simple as establishing a social media time budget and routine, or as involved as hiring a social media manager for your organization.

Ethical Concerns

Ethics concerning online engagement are vital. As allied health care providers, IBCLCs must be cognizant of their Code of Professional Conduct,³⁰ Scope of Practice,³¹ and Standards of Practice,³² whether engaging mothers face-to-face or online. Although these practice-guiding documents do not contain a specific social media policy, IBCLCs may want to review the American Medical Association's Policy on the Professionalism in the Use of Social Media.³³

In the United States, of particular concern is how to provide support in a way that respects privacy and confidentiality requirements under federal and state law and the IBCLC's practice-guiding documents. International Board Certified Lactation Consultants are interacting with a mother and baby; they have an obligation to do everything in their power to protect private health information. Engaging with mothers over social media raises interesting questions: What if a mother voluntarily shares her private health information on your Facebook Timeline? What if she posts a photo of her nipple lesion to your Twitter feed? What if she asks a

clinically significant question online and expects an answer in the same venue?

Because social media interactions do not permit a comprehensive intake, history, and assessment, IBCLCs are advised to not offer direct clinical advice to a mother in a social media venue. Social media communication should be educational and supportive in nature. Breastfeeding support providers have long used the phrase, "many mothers have found . . ." to provide guidance without advising specific clinical interventions. According to Elizabeth Brooks, JD, IBCLC, and president of ILCA, "The minute the conversation starts to be about THIS mom and HER breasts and HER baby, it has moved from social media to private consultation" (personal communication, August 2012). She also suggests phrases such as the following:

- "This is not a secure forum. Information you share here can be seen by others."
- "Nothing replaces a face-to-face consultation with a health care provider who has a duty to provide excellent care in a confidential manner."
- "My ethical requirements of confidentiality to a client/patient do not allow me to discuss your situation in an unsecure forum: please contact me [at e-mail or phone] so we may arrange a consultation."

Most practices, groups, and organizations develop a social media policy that outlines acceptable community behavior (such as respectful dialog) and describes the types of support the lactation professional will (and will not) provide online.

Conclusion

Social media is a leading source of information and support for health care topics, including birth and breastfeeding. Breastfeeding professionals have a unique opportunity to connect directly to mothers by using new media tools. By developing strategies that consider marketing goals, target audiences, and the level of engagement sought, individuals and groups can build practices, provide evidence-based information, and support mothers. Regardless of intent to use or not use social media, awareness of the Internet tools today's mothers are using to gather and share information during the childbearing year and beyond is critical.

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