



Healthcare Leaders are Speaking Out in Social Media

Providence St. Joseph CEO takes a stand on issues that matter

By Alan Shoebridge

Learn how one healthcare organization is using social media to advance its communication goals.

During the daily barrage of controversies, natural disasters, radical changes in healthcare and other issues, deciding how to personally respond is challenging for anyone. For CEOs and other leaders, raising their voices as part of the public discourse carries risks and rewards.

Until recently many leaders refrained from taking aggressive public stands on controversial issues. There have always been high-profile leaders in certain industries who aren't afraid to speak up, but healthcare leaders in general tend to be more reserved. If you sensed a change recently, you're not mistaken. In fact, a study in the October 2017 *Harvard Business Review* confirmed the

overall trend of CEOs becoming more outspoken.¹

Putting a stake in the ground on social and political issues is something that Rod Hochman, M.D., Providence St. Joseph Health (PSJH) CEO, felt passionately about, which led him to engage the organization's communications team to develop a strategy. The jumping-off point was a blog called "My Views." Although creating a blog wasn't revolutionary, using it to publicly share personal opinions on controversial issues was bold.

"For us, speaking out is a matter of social justice, which is part of our heritage and who we are as an organization," Hochman says. "We have a responsibility to be a voice for the voiceless, particularly as it relates to healthcare, which we fundamentally believe is a right not a

privilege. We put a lot of time and energy into speaking up for millions of Americans at risk for losing healthcare coverage. We need to make sure everyone understands what's at stake."

MAKE YOUR POSITIONS CLEAR

On his first day of blogging in July 2017, Hochman tackled potential changes to the Affordable Care Act and lamented the lack of progress: "Seven years later I thought the national debate would finally shift from how we pay for healthcare to how we deliver it. By now I thought the conversation would be about making Americans the healthiest

people in the world and developing a healthcare system that's affordable, high quality and convenient for everyone. Instead we're back to square one. Rather than talking about how to advance the U.S. healthcare system, our nation's leaders are talking about taking it backward."

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Building his blog topics from there, Hochman addressed a variety of weighty issues including racism, immigration, gun violence and more—all within the first three months. In choosing topics there is a

balance between themes and subjects that have been planned in partnership with the organization's board and leadership council and the need to react to specific current events. The PSJH communications team works with Hochman to evaluate certain topics and hone messaging, but he is the ultimate decision-maker.

One consistent theme that emerged was protecting the poor and vulnerable, whether advocating against potential changes to Medicaid or helping people affected by natural disasters. These blog entries served as calls to action that resulted in raising more than \$1 million for disaster relief and fostering political change.

HELPING LEADERS SPREAD THEIR MESSAGE

Having engaged, articulate leaders who want to speak out is something most communicators would willingly embrace; however, there are considerations to keep in mind.

"First and foremost the effort has to be authentic. This isn't something that the communications team can prescribe," says Orest Holubec, a PSJH senior vice president and national communication and external affairs officer. "Dr. Hochman has always been naturally outspoken, and one of his goals after becoming CEO was to raise the national presence of our organization."

Alignment Check

Asking these questions before speaking out will help you weigh the pros and cons. If you answer no to any of these, think twice before proceeding.

- Would our response be aligned with our mission and values?
- Is this topic something that would be natural for us to talk about, or would it confuse our audiences?
- Would adding our voice to the conversation cause people to think differently about the topic?
- Would mobilizing our employees/volunteers/community be helpful? If so, is there a specific call to action?

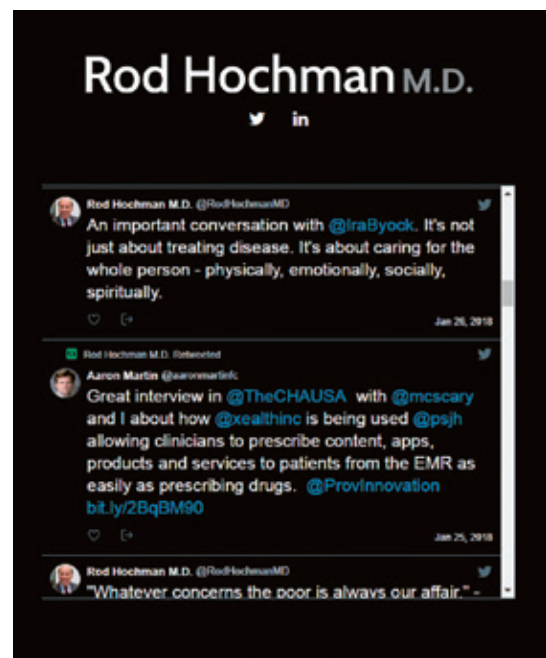
According to Holubec, your first step is to ensure the goals of speaking out are clear and will be supported by the messages used. For PSJH that meant drawing a clear, consistent connection to the organization's focus on the poor and vulnerable. Despite that clarity of purpose, communicating personal views brings challenges. "When you take a stand, there are always going to be people who don't agree with that point of view, including your employees," Holubec says. "We always try to respond to concerns, but we don't apologize. Dr. Hochman's advocacy role requires a strong voice for those we serve, especially people at risk."

AVOID "BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME"

Before launching a blog, devising a promotional strategy to drive traffic, engagement, and awareness is a necessity. At PSJH, the communications team leveraged email pushes and social media, including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. (See Figure 1.) Although all three platforms are important, Facebook consistently draws three times more engagement while Twitter drives a higher share of reach and traffic. These social channels allow you to share blog content, without replicating it, so you can aggregate response data, without harming search rankings.

As with all communication strategies, you need to measure success. Hochman's blog posts have routinely generated an engagement rate that is significantly higher than industry averages for likes, comments and shares. However, for PSJH influencing policy outcomes has been the most important outcome. "One of our goals was to start a national conversation about mental health," Holubec says. "And thanks in part to the strong results we've achieved with the blog, we are now a resource for speaking out on that issue and influencing key audiences, like politicians, who can make a difference. If we're unknown we can't be an effective resource."

Figure 1.
Providence St. Joseph CEO on Twitter



BUILDING A CASE TO GET STARTED

Hochman advises executives to overcome fears and embrace the positives of speaking out. "There is a lot of chaos in the world these days. As leaders we can encourage employees and communities to get involved and do something about tragedy and injustice rather than feeling helpless. It's important to be timely and act quickly. The sooner you can communicate, the more reassured your audiences will feel that there is a path forward and a way to engage and be part of the solution."

Read Dr. Hochman's blog at rodhochmanmd.org, or follow him on Twitter at [@RodHochmanMD](https://twitter.com/RodHochmanMD).

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¹Gaines-Ross, Leslie. "What CEO Activism Looks Like in the Trump Era." HBR.org. <https://hbr.org/2017/10/what-ceo-activism-looks-like-in-the-trump-era> (accessed February 1, 2018).