

The Era of the Empowered Patient



Consumers are taking charge of their healthcare like never before. They are doing more research before a doctor visit, more closely monitoring their doctor's recommendations and consulting with friends and family to validate their decisions.

To discover more about how consumers feel about their role in managing their healthcare, HealthCentral and the University of Virginia partnered on a unique consumer health / wellness attitude survey.

BY CHRISTOPHER M. SCHROEDER

Among the 1,452 reasons I love being in the consumer interactive worlds is I get to hear, watch and share countless stories of what people do and why. The most moving and inspiring stories are found in the areas of health – and in many respects, the most telling of a revolution in our midst. In all the connections and transparency unleashed by these capabilities, a greater truth has emerged:

People aren't only finding facts and data and connections – they are finding their voice.

We've long known that these fabulous technologies allow us to get what we want when and how we want it – information, transactions, human interactions. And when one starts to

not only realize but believe that they are not alone, that others have been through what they've been through, that we all can create greater transparency than ever before, we have the courage to take control of our lives. We are empowered.

I love this story of a classic case of what I call the empowered patient. He wrote me:

"After years of struggling, tons of research, and many 'conversations' with those who did it, I decided to brave a procedure. Again, doing my homework and getting advice, I selected a well-known doctor – kind of a celebrity I came to learn (he had worked with Tiger Woods!). When the doctor walked in looking down at a clipboard of forms and began to recite the procedure – he never looked at me; it felt like I was getting an oil change. I remained silent, forcing the doctor at some point to look up at me. As soon as we made eye contact, I extended my hand and said my name. He sheepishly reciprocated and I then asked a few simple questions:

'How is your morning going? Did you have a fight with your wife last night, or were you out late drinking?'

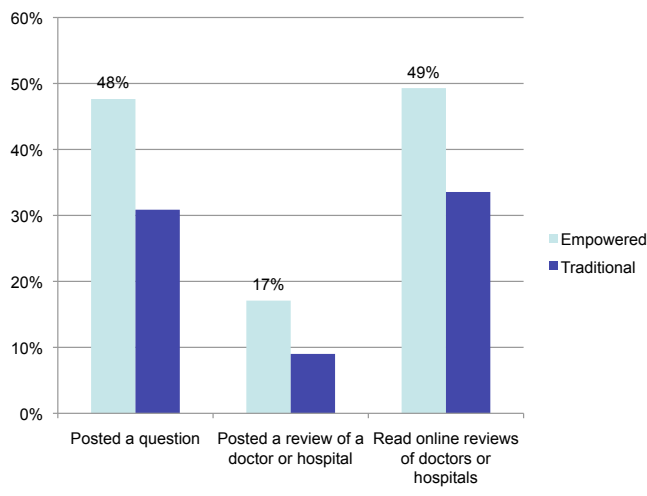
He was clearly taken aback. I explained that despite the fact that he had successfully performed some 70,000 of these procedures, this was the only part of the anatomy that I had and I wanted to be sure he was in good condition to perform this procedure. Not sure what to make of me, he paused before responding that all was well. I was prepared, we were on the same team. And it made all the difference."

Yet what do we really know about the heart of these phenomena beyond the story – how many of these folks are there really, and what traits might they share? I commissioned Ted Smith, HealthCentral's patient guru, and Professor James Burroughs, consumer psychology expert at the University of Virginia, to dig into our communities and see what they would find.

Fig 1: Influencers

Empowered patients are much more likely to be seeking out other patients' experiences and sharing their own.

Have you done any of these things?



We learned that an “empowered patient” is an active co-pilot in his or her health journey – highly respectful of medical professionals, but believing that THEY are responsible for managing their health and healthcare. We also saw that they were active “influentials” in their areas of experience – they very much want and do share and exchange ideas from their experiences. To dig more deeply we asked people living with chronic conditions about:

- Relationships with doctors
- Treatment history
- Social habits
- Need for cognition
- Self-confidence
- Media preferences

We found that nearly one-third of respondents can be considered highly empowered patients. Fifty percent of respondents are near or potentially empowered – willing to be more active, with some characteristics of empowered patients – and 20 percent are mainstream resistant patients with a low probability of engagement.

A need for cognition

Empowered and near-empowered patients have a high need for cognition, which means that they’re not happy with simply knowing a particular prescription successfully treats their condition – they want to know why it works and how it compares.

These people want to understand not only their condition, but their treatment options. These patients are more likely to have a strong sense of self-efficacy, meaning that they are confident in their ability to accomplish almost anything if they decide to do it.

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Education, income, had no effect

Counter-intuitively, none of these factors’ predicts whether someone is an empowered patient:

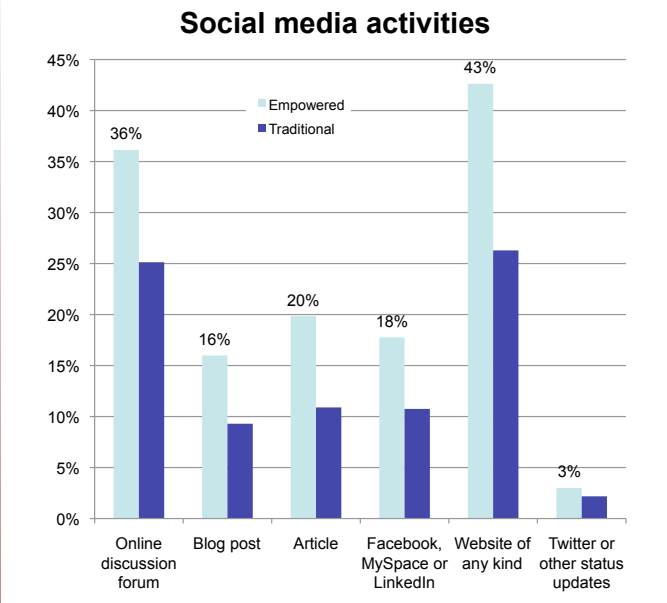
- Makes \$25,000 or \$200,000 a year
- Has a high school diploma or a graduate degree
- Uses private insurance or Medicare

Personality traits, and benefiting from their own successes in stepping forward, seem to play a much stronger role in patient empowerment than education, income or source of health insurance.

Fig 2: Leading in social media

More empowered patients:

- Made a health care-related blog post
- Made a healthcare post via social media such as Facebook
- “Tweeted” on a healthcare issue



Empowered patients lead the way online

When we looked at more passive Internet activities – simply searching for information, for example – we found little difference between empowered and near-empowered patients. That is to be expected as basic Internet searching is so common today. However, empowered patients are much more likely to share personal experiences or seek out other patients’ stories. They take a more active role online than traditional patients do. These consumers are even more likely to use text messaging or other mobile applications, valuing real time convenience and connectivity.

Empowered patients are leading the way in intelligently engaging with – well – intelligent interactive marketing. When it comes to marketing materials from pharma companies, all patients seemed to prefer a combination of printed patient education materials and brand.com Web sites over television and magazine ads. And they prefer to be thought of as intelligent co-pilots of their own health and well-being.

The most demanding, but most loyal

The tendency to want to be in the driver’s seat extends to an empowered patient’s relationship with her doctor. In our survey, we asked if changing doctors was a viable option. Empowered patients were much more likely to find a new physician if they felt their current doctor was not managing their condition well enough.

We dug a little deeper into the numbers and found these patients are the most demanding, but also the most rewarding. They are more likely to change doctors, but once they've found a person they can work with, they are more likely to stick with that provider. It is possible that this same attitude could extend to other aspects of healthcare, such as brand loyalty to prescription medications.

These people still rely on traditional medical authorities to help improve their health, but they're not willing to cede all control.

What about the near-empowered patients?

After we had a good profile of an empowered patient, we were curious about the rest of our audience. Could they be motivated or influenced to become an empowered patient?

Many of the near-empowered patients have many of the same tendencies and personality traits as empowered patients. Part of this 50 percent can be influenced by appealing to their need for understanding and desire to be addressed in a direct, straightforward manner, as opposed to a patronizing approach.

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The rest of the traditional mainstream patients are more likely to be swayed by social appeals from empowered patients. Empowered patients have the potential to be influencers and affect the opinions of traditional patients.

There will always be folks in life who really do not engage, and value others taking control of their health guidance. But they are a small, and we believe shrinking, part of the greater population. This group doesn't share any qualities with the other two groups. I pass no judgment here – some of my most beloved family members fall in this category – it's just that and it is unlikely that marketing appeals of any kind would motivate them to become empowered patients.

Do your campaigns resonate with empowered patients?

What does this mean for brand.com sites and other interactive marketing materials?

First, find a group of high need for cognition consumers in your target market. Then use them to evaluate your marketing materials by following these steps:

1. Look at the ratio of quantity of information and return on information. Empowered patients want just enough information to make a good decision, but not so much that it becomes overwhelming to sort through it all.
2. Watch out for complexity and redundancy.
3. Consider the style of these communications. If empowered patients feel they are being talked down to or not taken seriously, they will reject the message.
4. Watch out for patronizing tone and fit with personal experience.

This means transparency and partnership, being on the side of health seekers on their terms on their rudders for their health journeys. It means when anyone in your shop says, "all that matters is the script" or "compliance" – critical if not

highly clinical sounding goals – you are empowered to say, "first, am I helping real people have the tools to prepare them to work with their medical professionals?" The rest, I'd suggest, will take care of itself.

*For more information about learning how to identify people with a high need for cognition, or more details about this study's methodology, visit <http://www.healthcentral.com/about/study-methodology>. **DTC***

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