

HOSPITAL ONLINE BRANDING DURING THE PANDEMIC: A HEALTHY CHANGE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way brands communicate to their potential and current customers. This paper uses a multimethod approach to specifically study nine corporate Indian chain hospital brands and their online social media presence during COVID-19. The authors sought to decipher the implicit information gained from Facebook pages and conducted a qualitative study with NVivo 12.3. to understand online branding activity over a year, which was for six months pre-COVID-19 and the first six months during COVID-19. This study corroborated these findings through qualitative interviews with six marketing managers from these brands and thus triangulated the findings. The objective of this paper is to understand these changes, and this will pave the way for the country's smaller hospitals that are yet to delve into Social Media Marketing.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, branding, hospital marketing, crises management, social media, online marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Whether an economic crisis or a healthcare one, businesses have understood that even though their work has slowed down and been impacted by the pandemic their brand communications have to continue. With the increased use of online platforms and social media during the lockdown, customers would hear them more now than ever. Currently, where the markets are fiercely competitive, it is of extreme important to continue to stay on top of the minds of customers or else brands will lose the position they held and lose out in terms of impact.

Health care service providers and other healthcare companies such as pharmaceutical firms and medical

device manufacturers have understood the gains of advertising as the market they are catering to today has become more curious and healthcare consumers make informed choices when it comes to anything and that includes healthcare products and services.

In the past, a patient would go to whichever hospital their family physician (general practitioner) would refer them to, but situations have turned and now physicians have started giving their patients options where they can have treatment provided and it is the patient who is the decision-maker. Based on word of mouth and the reviews of hospitals, patients choose the hospital to receive their treatment.

According to recent findings, consumer satisfaction and not exploiting the crisis to boost revenue appears to be a key factor in determining whether or not a business is seen as trustworthy. Brands must exhibit the correct techniques to assist organizations and respond to this public health emergency while remaining true to their beliefs [1]. In addition, the fear of the pandemic has resulted in delayed treatment thus patients reach hospitals in a critical state due to initial neglect [2]. The pandemic has given hospitals a chance to reclaim their standing, by being there for society when the majority of the hospitals had closed their doors to COVID-19 patients due to fear from their doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers [3]. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in social media usage as people have been indoors and due to more time at hand, has increased the time spent on social media platforms. This has called for increased engagement on these platforms [11].

Prior to being affected by COVID-19, most organizations focused their marketing strategies towards promoting their services to increase their market share, but brands have shifted with time towards branding in a way to contribute to help ease the patient's situation. Organization's that pay greater attention to their brand image are using this crisis situation as an opportunity to build relationships and strengthen them to form long-term bonds. Hospitals have changed their focus from just advertising and promoting services to health education and preventive healthcare.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Change is inevitable. As such, all global economies are susceptible to being impacted by a catalyst capable of altering the economy as well as the behaviours of consumers within that economy. COVID-19 may prove to be such an economic catalyst. The Harris Poll conducted between late March and early May 2020, found that between 46% and 51% of US adults were using social media more since the outbreak began [1]. In the May 2020 survey, 51% of total respondents 60% of those ages 18 to 34; 64% of those ages 35 to 49; and 34% of those ages 65 and up reported increased usage on certain social media platforms [1]. While some businesses are struggling others are doing well if they have adapted to the change in time. Everything has changed in consumer behaviour and buying patterns, there is an increased demand for food takeout or home delivery; immunity booster consumption has increased; increased demand of household items and cleaning materials; and the subscription to internet and online entertainment services have also increased.

Businesses that were highly dependent on physical visits like supermarkets, shopping malls, street shopping, salons, theatres, hospitality have all been affected drastically by the pandemic.

This study focuses on understanding the direction in which the corporate hospitals are moving with regards to the marketing trend. There is very sparse literature in this area.

Marketing as a function in hospital

When compared to previous years, there has been a major shift in hospital management priorities, with a greater emphasis on the hospital's performance in terms of clinical, operational, and financial metrics. The emphasis on the bottom line has grown, as have efforts to improve the patient experience by offering high-quality treatment and care while keeping costs low. Performance has become more important in hospitals. Hospitals need a marketing department so that they can educate the patients on the services available. This department plays a role in increasing the footfall of patients to the hospital. Hospitals that do not stay ahead and market their services may lose out if there are hospitals proximally that are marketing [5]. Even the most loyal patients, if not reminded of the hospital brand, can shift brands if they get captured by the marketing of another hospital. It is not only the responsibility of the doctor to retain the patients, but it is very important that every aspect of the hospital shows the patient that they care, right from all the staff within the hospital, to follow up and reminders after the patient is out of the hospital. Modern hospitals are focusing on providing a wholesome experience where they attend to the patient's physical health, mental health and psychological wellness [6]. They cater to all the needs of patients and ensure that they are the only place and one-stop location that patients can go to for all their needs.

The competition in healthcare has increased in the last decade with a large number of private hospitals and corporate chains setting up hospitals across the country [7]. With this increased competition it is important that hospitals get visibility so as to get an influx of patients.

The majority of the private corporate chain hospitals are located in tier one and tier two cities in India and are mostly targeting the same consumer base [8]. In the past, hospitals would solely depend on word of mouth promotion where the work of the physician and the services provided would be spoken about voluntarily. There has been a constant debate on the suitability of using modern marketing

strategies by hospitals. It has been the belief that the work done by the hospital will speak for itself and attract patients and no special advertisements or promotion efforts should be made [5,9]. Most of the marketing activities carried out by hospitals involved radio and television advertisements, brochures, testimonial videos, press coverage, launch events, television education series, where services were marketed with the view of educating the public. The majority of the hospitals use Corporate social responsibility activities through free health check camps to promote their services to patients [10–12]. They categorize activities such as information, education and communication to the public and not an advertising activity which is considered inappropriate for hospitals.

Branding activities carried out by Healthcare Organisations

Previously, corporates and private equity firms did not consider hospitals to be good investments because they were poorly managed and coordinated [13]. Healthcare professional businessmen had little awareness of hospital management and were more focused on clinical aspects, which should ideally be the case [14,15]. Because of the way hospitals and the healthcare industry have transmogrified and evolved, they have now become one of the most lucrative investment attractions for investors. [16,17] [10,18]

Hospitals are shifting business tactics in order to deliver excellent treatment to more patients at a lower cost, while attempting to maintain profitability in the midst of ever-regular updates in the forms of the latest medical technology while cutting costs [12,19]. As business practices evolve to include investments in new systems, software, partnerships, health agencies, as well as other innovations, the way hospitals identify themselves must evolve as well [20]. To ensure a favourable return, hospitals must go above and beyond their traditional functioning. Investments and their justifications must be part of a wider brand that represents the most significant advantages to every one of the various stakeholder groups. This could entail additional elevated, accessible care for individuals and the wider public. An investment could offer a new possibility for health care workers to give care in a more efficient or effective manner. In an era of rising investment and competition, a hospital's brand can be one of its most valuable business assets, assisting it in attracting new patients as well as qualified health care personnel, and establishing itself as the region's preferred provider, which is exactly what most of these corporate hospitals are aiming

for.[3,22,23] Even within a single county, the needs and expectations of patients can be radically different. These inconsistencies were discovered thanks to research, which helped get to the heart of what patients really valued. According to some studies, the country lacked high-quality patient care that was provided in other countries.

Employees were enabled to deliver on the brand promise through a number of internal branding activities. All of these efforts result in precise promises to patients and measurable behavioural expectations for health professionals and employees [1,9,14,24]. Healthcare workers are continually encouraged to live up to that standard, and their performance is measured in part by how well they do so. As a result, the brand serves as a solid foundation for a more patient-centred approach to thinking about issues, operations, and standards, as well as a guide for many crucial decisions and metrics.

The brand is then marketed externally through a synchronised marketing campaign after employees have been trained. Print, online, and outdoor advertising, direct mail, a new literature system, and a mobile-optimized, responsive website that communicated a clear commitment to patients and other external constituencies were all part of this strategy.

Consistent actions and messaging generate a compelling brand. Employees are focused on the experience, and hospital brands will be more successful in recruiting patients and extremely competent medical practitioners if they use a combination of internal and external marketing. The term "patient experience" encompasses more than just personalised physician attention. All components of hospital brands, including social media profiles and websites, should be focused on providing exceptional treatment.

When hospitals use social media to customise health treatment and share information, they are partaking in Health 2.0. [20] Hospitals ought to have a strong social media presence that complements their overall marketing plan. Consumers and prospective patients spend a significant amount of time on social media sites. According to a recent report by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) US's Health Research Institute (HRI), one-third of consumers were using sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and online forums to find health-related information, track symptoms, and broadcast their opinions about doctors, drugs, treatments etc. The social media pages help to engage

with patients and prospective patients thus building a brand name that will stick and come in handy when the time is right.

The issues that hospitals face have also evolved. Increased competition, and balancing administrative costs and efficiency, are only a few of them. The industry is under tremendous pressure to put systems in place to increase efficiency and better manage cash while maintaining high levels of patient care and satisfaction. To reach the desired goal, a hospital's performance must be measured and managed effectively.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a multi-method study. Multi-method research is research that uses multiple forms of qualitative data such as interviews and observations or multiple forms of quantitative data such as survey data and experimental data. The study has focused on primary data that has been collected through in-depth interviews with six marketing managers of Corporate Hospital Brands in India. The authors have also analysed the social media activity on Facebook pages for six months pre COVID-19 and six months during COVID-19 have been reviewed so as to understand patterns of nine corporate hospital brands in India. NVivo 12.3 software was used to undertake analytic clustering of key themes and corresponding subthemes. NVivo (version 12.3) is a software programme that is commonly used to complete thematic analysis, sentiment analysis, and hierarchical clustering based on word frequency using Pearson's coefficient.

The objective of this research is to examine the pre-COVID-19 marketing strategies used by the participating hospitals, as well as the shifts and changes that happened for six months during COVID-19. Understanding the trajectory of large corporate hospitals is crucial because it will pave the way for most of the country's smaller hospitals, which have implemented modifications based on big chain hospital's experience.

The objective of this study can be stated through the research questions which are as follows.:

RQ1. What was the favored marketing mode, and what changes occurred during the six months prior to and during the early COVID-19 phase?

RQ2. What was the content that these hospitals focused on during the six months pre-COVID-19 and during the COVID-19 phase?

SAMPLE

When choosing the sample for the study the authors kept in mind the criteria, which was that the hospitals had to:

1. be private corporate chain hospitals
2. be in India
3. have an active Facebook page.

We have extracted Facebook posts available for a span of 12 months broken down to the timeframe of six months from September 2019 to February 2020 and March 2020 to August 2020 as the study period during COVID-19 six months.

The Goa Institute of Management, ethics committee granted the ethics clearance to undertake this study.

INTERVIEWS

There were six telephone interviews conducted with officials having the designation of Marketing Head, Group Marketing Head and Regional Head of large corporate chain hospitals in India. The interviews took between 10 -15 minutes. The interviews were stopped when data saturation was attained. The interviews were anonymized and verbatim transcribed, with a thematic analysis conducted. The interview protocol was tested through a pilot study. Some of the questions asked were:

1. What are the modes of marketing that you all focussed on in the first six months when hit by COVID-19? What is the trend now?
2. What were the main thoughts or messages you were seeking to get across to the community during these months while most people were staying indoors?
3. What was the shift in the budget from before the epidemic to six months after the outbreak?
4. In online marketing what was the shift in the areas of marketing as in where all which platforms would you focus the online marketing in?

DATA ANALYSIS

Findings from the Online Branding in Hospitals

Hospitals have been one of the very few industries to adopt an online marketing platform. Until approximately the last 4-

5 years even the corporate hospitals have had a very minimal presence online.

Prior to COVID-19 marketing budgets have mainly been focused on offline activities which included activities like organizing specialty Outpatient Department's, Continuous Medical Education (CME's), One to one doctor meetings, outreach activities, clinical engagements, and training programmes for various groups. The focus was on educating people with various medical conditions and its treatment. During the initial months when COVID-19 hit India, hospital marketing was purely online. This mainly focused on topics such as protocols to be followed and the precautionary measures to be followed by the public to fight COVID-19, vaccination drives by various hospitals and organizations, and discussions amongst doctors regarding the increase in the cases of new variants of COVID-19 were organized. The webinars were increased to a very large extent from one or two webinars in the pre COVID-19 period to 50 to 60 webinars in the first six months during COVID-19.

Healthcare infrastructure by various healthcare fraternity was discussed as well and the need for any further changes in case of another wave was discussed. As hospitals and society accepted that COVID-19 is a reality that they would need to live with for a while, the marketing departments moved their focus on educating the public on the lifestyle changes that one needs to adapt to during-COVID-19 and the various ways to cope with it.

In the past, 90% of the marketing budget spend of hospitals would be focused on above the line marketing activities such as radio, advertising, local TV, Newspapers, magazines, outdoor hoardings, bus shelter branding and the press.

The scenario during COVID-19 is inclined towards posting and promotions where hospitals mainly use online platforms. From the nine hospitals that were part of this study, all of them had a presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube. Some hospitals also had their presence on platforms such as Pinterest, Tumblr, blogs and were also present on private sites like Practo.

Table 1: Social Media Presence amongst the nine hospitals studied

Social Media Platform	Study Hospital's usage %
Facebook	100
Instagram	100
Twitter	100
LinkedIn	100
YouTube	100
Pinterest	87
Others(WeChat,TikTok etc)	72

Findings on Online Branding trend during COVID-19

Branding during the lockdown has important implications for marketers who are focused on maintaining and building a lasting relationship with customers. Organizations that have understood the importance of this connection, have increased their online output as compared to prior to the pandemic. The representatives of the nine hospitals interviewed have shown a clear increase in the number of Facebook posts from the pre COVID-19 to more than double in the first six months during COVID-19 phase.

Planning has always required careful assessment of data and changes in relation to customer behavior. During the outbreak, traditional marketing and advertising spend declined as there was not much movement of people, but digital marketing spends increased. Several marketers increased their output, so as not to miss out when the situation stabilized. This helps to stay in touch and engage with the public who could likely need the hospital services for either themselves or their relatives and the increased usage of social marketing so as to reach customers better.

TABLE 2: BREAKUP OF THE EXPENDITURE ON SOCIAL MEDIA AMONGST THE NINE HOSPITALS STUDIED

Online Platform	Study Hospitals % of budget expenditure
Website	25
Blogs	5
Online CME	10
Online booking Sites like Practo	20
Facebook	5
Instagram	5
Twitter	5

In line with this study's findings, the focus of online social media posts during COVID-19 shifted towards education. This included COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 related health education, relationship building, encouraging behavior change to bring in better health outcomes, and a smaller part of the posts was related to the promotion of services. Several of the education activities were also engagement activities conducted by specialist doctors over a live Facebook session. With doctors also having more time during the lockdown, this was a good way to keep in touch with the public and address the most important needs of the time, which is wellness. Prior to the pandemic Facebook and other social media posts were not given much importance and didn't have a structured plan. The posts would be very random and focused more on service promotion rather than relationship building, engagement or education.

There were other marketing activities that were given more importance and these were highlighted in this study.

Interviewer: What is the marketing trend in the first six months when hit by COVID-19. And how has it shifted from pre-COVID-19?

Marketing Manager: "Prior to COVID-19, the market only focused on educating people with various medical conditions and their treatment. During COVID-19, topics such as protocols/precautionary measures to be followed by people to fight COVID-19, vaccination camps by various hospitals and organizations, increase in the cases of new variants of COVID-19 were discussed. Healthcare infrastructure by various healthcare fraternities was discussed too. But during COVID-19, they are focusing on the lifestyle changes one needs to adapt to during COVID-19 and the various ways to cope with it."

Interviewer: What online marketing platforms did you'll focus on? What were the main thoughts or messages you were seeking to get across to the community during these months while most people were staying indoors?

Marketing Manager: "For posting and promotions, we mainly use Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. But we generally do post on Twitter too. We focus on Community building campaigns, Online CMEs, Health education via blogs, videos, and FB Live, Package promotion via means of various campaigns, generating leads to cater to international patients, and promoting events to generate traction to the OPDs."

The choice of marketing platforms was similar with some organizations choosing to focus on some platforms more than others. The activities also were similar, and most managers agreed that the focus was to connect to the patients and build a relationship so that they were the first choice whenever required.

Interviewer: What was the shift in the budget from before the epidemic to six months after the outbreak?

Marketing Manager: "Previously we were 60% offline and 40% online, now our budgets are just the opposite, 60% of the marketing budget is spent online and 40% is offline, and this may continue even after things settle."

Although these were the words of one of the interviewees, most of the responses were similar (data saturation), with a few minor exceptions.

Some managers were pleased with the new budget plan since it allows them to spend more money online for a reduced price.

Interviewer: In the online marketing what was the shift in the focus areas of marketing?

Marketing Manager: "We conducted a lot of webinars, FB Live events, and posts to discuss topics related to the safety measures to be followed by everyone during COVID-19, COVID-19 and other co-morbidities, Ways to improve one's immunity and health post-COVID-19, Vaccination, Healthcare infrastructure, post-COVID-19 care, new normal, promoting OPD consultations and even Online consultations."

"In the past, we would be promoting Cardiology-related videos, and patient testimonials related to nephrology. Sometimes we would be promoting women's health packages and gynae-related packages. Since World Heart Day is nearing, we would keep talking about Precautions/choices for a healthy heart, Cardiac consultations at the hospital, Cardiac emergencies, and Symptoms of cardiac attack via promotions. Celebrating these health days will continue. We have promoted cardiac-related packages too."

Marketing managers stated that COVID-19 has pushed them to do several positive things like online CME's etc. They believed that they would continue this way as its also a form of giving back to the society and the people

appreciate the live sessions and health tips a lot. It is the specialists who they turn too for correct advice as there are incorrect messages passed around very often.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on marketing in hospitals. It has implications for hospital administrators and marketers who are focussed on engaging people to maintain or increase brand visibility and increase their market share.

As a result of their online marketing presence, customers may feel more attached or disengaged from a hospital. The study brings out the detail of rapid adaptation and the shift of corporate hospitals to stay in touch with the patients through the online mode during the pandemic when the lockdown was announced. The hospitals continued to provide value to patients through online education which has become a major focus.

At times of such uncertainty, it is of great importance that the hospitals show the public that they are always there at the times of need. They are accountable for all the healthcare needs of the patients and their families and are a reliable service provider. The hospitals through their online marketing strategy communicate care by using terms like "#stayhealthy", "#nhcares", "#staysafe" and at the same time communicate trust and that they are reliable by using terms like "#happypatient", "#patientspeaks", "#Indiafightscorona" etc.

The marketing budget allocation has a clear motive and purpose that the hospitals have to achieve. Most of these leading hospitals have understood that gaining the trust and building relationship with the public is the way forward and thus all their activities are aligned along these lines. The new marketing plan must be based on a strategic plan for achieving broad marketing goals and directions. In the past there was no clear strategy of what the hospitals were to focus on.

Educating the public and conducting online CME's have gained traction and is the way most of the corporate hospitals are moving towards.

The interviews and the Facebook post-analysis corroborated the findings that education, engagement, and relationship building had the largest share of the posts,

followed by promotion of services and behavior change activities. In fact, behavior change activities also could be categorized under education, engagement, and relationship building as they show patients that they care. The pandemic was a push for hospitals to be the torchbearers of change. Adaptation was the need of the hour which got them to shift everything online including consultation and CMEs.

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study were limited to corporate hospitals in India, and they may not be applicable elsewhere. Future research might look at corporate hospitals around the world. Hospital marketing has yet to be fully explored for this industry and examining global patterns will provide a better insight. Future research can look at the changes that have occurred after the pandemic as a longitudinal study, to examine what other changes have occurred and their impact. Other factors also can be studied such as the economic, cultural, and geophysical impact of the activities carried out by the corporate hospitals. Future studies can also look at the presence on other social media platforms and consider other factors such as the number of 'likes' and reach that these hospitals are engaging with. Social media marketing is the way forward in the hospital domain, to engage patients and society and can be a huge benefit if used in a proper and planned manner.

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