

# eHealthcare Strategy & Trends

*Internet Management, Marketing, Analysis and Intelligence*

Volume 13 Number 3 • March 2011

[www.strategichealthcare.com](http://www.strategichealthcare.com)

## ASK THE EXPERT ... BEN DILLON

### Question: How Can I Use the Web to Support My Complex Healthcare Organization?

Healthcare systems are complex. As they acquire facilities and physician groups, expand service offerings, and spread their geographic reach, their complexity only grows. These developments lead to many challenges when trying to promote the healthcare system.

When healthcare organizations promote themselves using traditional media, they can focus on a single service or a point of differentiation. Promoting that same organization online requires presenting a much wider picture of the system, making it more difficult to hide the intricacies of the organization. With multiple hospitals, clinics, physicians, and services, how do you tell your story online in a concise way that demonstrates your range and depth, yet doesn't confuse consumers?

#### **Developing your strategy: One or many?**

If you are like most healthcare organizations, your health system has a brand, and so do your individual hospitals and clinics. How do you present this jumble of brands within brands? Should you create one Web site or several separate sites?

It depends.

Whether you present the entire organization using one Web site or maintain a set of separate sites, these choices represent two ends of a sliding scale. There are options in between. What works for one health system won't necessarily work for another.

#### **One for all and all for one**

Organizations may choose to create one online presence for the entire health system because it's more efficient. You avoid having multiple sites compete for your Web team's attention and budget.

A unified approach also helps consumers build stronger relationships with your organization by allowing them to easily find the services available systemwide. Rather than visiting multiple, targeted sites, consumers refer to one site that transcends their current health situation.

The trade-off is that consolidated sites for larger health systems often make it difficult for consumers to find resources available locally. Health systems with a large geo-

graphic footprint may find this option a liability as patients typically don't travel for routine healthcare services.

#### **Divide and conquer**

At the other end of the spectrum, organizations may choose to create multiple online outlets for individual hospitals, clinics, and key services, particularly if they have strong, distinctive brands. For example, if your heart institute is the leader in the market and is promoted in offline channels, it makes sense to create a unique online presence for it.

Organizations may also choose to build separate Web sites if their facilities compete for the same patients or if internal structures are too entrenched to allow for a systemwide representation. Despite facilities being part of the same system, presenting them in a single Web site may not be politically feasible.

More sites often mean higher costs, and that's why many organizations stay away from this approach. The costs of maintaining and promoting multiple sites and brands are far



Exhibit No. 1: Genesis women's health services

higher than presenting the system in a unified way.

### A hybrid approach

Rather than creating a single site or a set of separate sites, many organizations use a hybrid approach.

Genesis Health System headquartered in Davenport, IA, finds success in its hybrid approach. Genesis was born of a merger between two hospitals and has grown dramatically since then. This expansion has been driven by organic growth and consolidation with other healthcare organizations. The Genesis brand is well recognized in its region and carries high expectations for quality and customer service. When Genesis adds a new facility, it determines how and when to brand that facility as part of the Genesis family on a case-by-case basis, but favors inclusion under the Genesis umbrella.

“When patients enter a Genesis facility, they know what they can expect of us. In fact, it is that ‘Genesis experience’ based on quality, compassion, and patient safety that drives patients to our door,” explains Ken Croken, vice president

of corporate communications and business development at Genesis. “When a Genesis facility operates under a separate brand, it loses the benefits of these consumer expectations. In the past, we’ve allowed some newly added facilities in our system to maintain their original brand identity for a certain time to provide a more gradual transition. The Web allows us the flexibility we need to message this [development] effectively.”

The majority of Genesis facilities operate under a single brand and a unified Web site. The Genesis Web site, [www.genesishealth.com](http://www.genesishealth.com), contains information about the system, and all information about its services, locations, doctors, and events is displayed at the system level. For example, when a site visitor goes to a service-line page, Genesis provides one presentation of the information and promotes the facilities that provide that service in the copy and left navigation. (See Exhibit No. 1.)

The Genesis site presents minimal facility-specific information. Each of its primary medical center campuses has its own Web page that can be accessed through the location

finder. Each Web page has a unique message from the facility’s CEO and directions to the facility, but all pages share the same design, navigation, and quick links as the system-level site.

Two facilities that have recently come under management by Genesis Health currently have their own sites. The new sites share brand elements and functionality with Genesis’ main site; however, each site maintains a vanity URL ([www.MercerHospital.org](http://www.MercerHospital.org) and [www.JCRHC.org](http://www.JCRHC.org)) and contains unique content.

“The Web allows us to tell our evolving brand story at our own pace,” says Croken. “It’s an essential communications vehicle, where we can share news on affiliations and explain that even as the healthcare industry and our organization change, our commitment to our community remains the same.”

Avera, a health system headquartered in Sioux Falls, SD, takes a different hybrid approach. Avera launched a systemwide Web site redesign last year ([www.avera.org](http://www.avera.org)).

“We developed a site that provides greater emphasis on our regionally known brand, while still maintaining the strength of our local facilities,” says Daryl Thuringer, Avera vice president of marketing and public relations. Avera created a unified site for the system that showcases the individual strengths of each of its 29 hospitals and 198 clinics. Each facility site has its own home page, content, left-hand navigational structure, and vanity URL, for example, [www.avera.org/mckennan](http://www.avera.org/mckennan). Design and branding is consistent throughout the site. Each facility section employs a similar template and follows established style standards. Top-level navigation remains

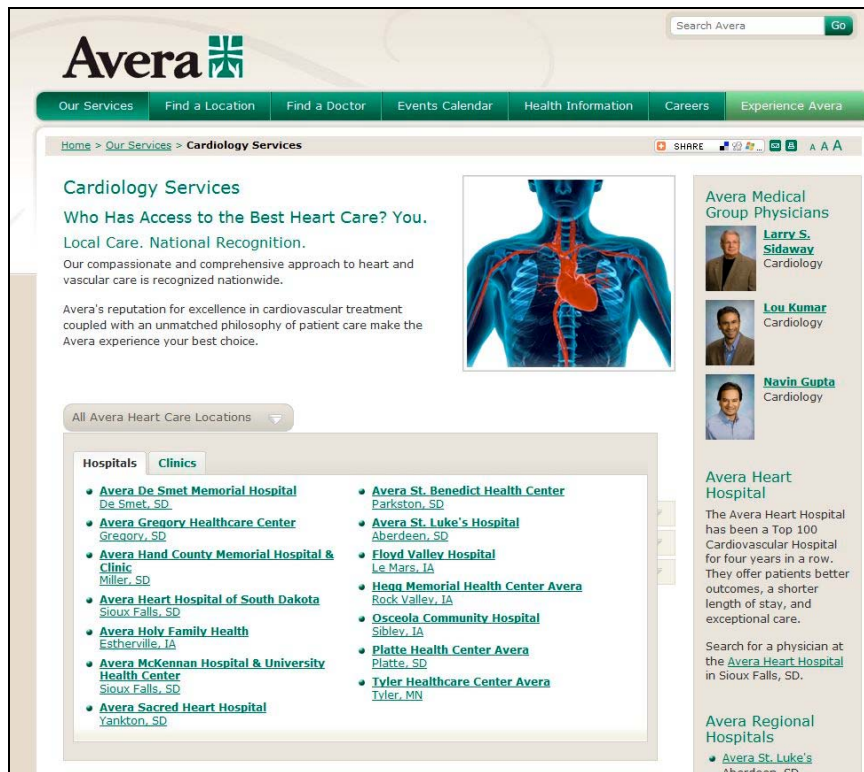


Exhibit No. 2: Avera cardiology services

the same throughout the site, allowing Avera to promote doctors, events, and locations at the health system level.

There are two main benefits to Avera’s approach.

First, messaging at the facility level remains consistent with messaging at the system level. This structure builds on Avera’s efforts to strengthen the system brand and saves resources. Service-line information can be presented and messaged consistently across the system, while individual facilities can expand on the content that is truly distinctive to the facility. For example, one facility may choose to promote open heart surgery while another may expand on its cancer services. Both facilities may use the same content for palliative care.

Second, the system is able to cross-promote its services. “With our new

site, we developed a structure that encourages consumers to stay within the Avera network when receiving services,” says Thuringer. If a facility does not offer a certain service, it can easily refer site visitors to other facilities in the network that offer the service, as seen in Exhibit No. 2. This approach allows the patients’ relationships with their local hospital to be the gateway to the rest of the network. Avera is able to use its size as a competitive weapon by showcasing services not provided by smaller competitors. It also allows all facilities and service lines to share resources, such as the health library, as well as interactive components, such as the calendar of events, preregistration, and bill payment.

Avera allows its hospitals and clinics to have a major presence on the site, with individual Web pages, dedicated content, and unique navigation. Genesis displays most content at the system level, with some information at the facility level. Both health sys-

tems are using elements of a hybrid approach that have been applied to meet each organization’s unique business goals.

## Effective Tips for Every Situation

As you evaluate which approach best suits your unique organization, here are a few tips that can help you be more successful:

- **Align your staff with the strategy.** Organizations that can’t devote staff and resources to each facility or other key components should be cautious when segmenting sites.
- **Factor in geographic proximity.** There’s little benefit to the consumer to presenting a unified face for a set of facilities that are too far apart for most patients to consider.
- **Find strategies that leverage investments.** Share your health library. Use the same descriptions for birth preparation classes at all of your facilities. Reducing redundant work creates the opportunity to invest time in more valuable activities.
- **Find ways to cross-promote offerings.** If one facility doesn’t have a service, make sure you lead site visitors to your other facilities that do. The goal, first and foremost, is to keep the business “in the family.”
- **Create a single vision for your Web strategy and make sure everyone is on board.** Unless each site is operating independently without consideration for the others, a single vision is needed to keep individual facilities from veering off and undermining the efforts of the others.

### Overcoming obstacles and gaining buy-in

Regardless of how you choose to present your organization online, you will undoubtedly run into some challenges. The best approach to overcome internal resistance is to engage all stakeholders in the process.

Avera understood that communicating the organization's brand would require a sophisticated online strategy that would allow the system to organize its sites simultaneously as a system and as local facilities. Such a dramatic shift could be politically challenging, so Avera created a governance committee composed of stakeholders from the health system as well as its hospitals and clinics. The committee met routinely to ensure the online portion of the project aligned with the health system's overarching branding goals.


"Avera is a health system built on a tradition of partnership and collaboration, so it's important that we bring together key players on a routine basis to ensure buy-in and to leverage assets," explains Thuringer. "We have a working committee that handles the day-to-day project management of the Web and a marketing committee that reviews Web initiatives at monthly meetings. Working through the systemwide marketing committee allows us to hear from regional leadership from across Avera marketing departments, focus on the same goals, and stay invested in current initiatives."

For Avera, the key to gaining buy-in was opening the lines of communication. Having various groups represented in the decision-making process helped secure buy-in for Web initiatives and allowed the health system to align and leverage internal resources.

### Remember your goals

Using one Web site allows you to present a consistent message and brand. The structure utilizes resources more efficiently and allows you to cross-promote your services. Creating multiple sites allows you to target information and differentiate your facilities from others within the same geographic region. A hybrid approach takes advantage of both opportunities.

As you choose the best strategy for translating your complex organization online, the key is to remember your overarching goals.

"When we approached our redesign, our main goal was to design the site in a way that would help keep patients in the Avera network when seeking services," recalls Thuringer. "When we hit roadblocks in the decision-making process, our team would ask 'What would keep patients in the network?' and make the decision based on the answer. Revisiting our main goal throughout the process ensured we showcased the strength of the Avera network at every turn." 



*Ben Dillon is vice president, e-health evangelist, and co-owner of Geonetric, a Cedar Rapids, IA-based firm. Dillon writes and speaks extensively about*

*Geonetric's e-health research and the industry-leading efforts of its clients. He can be reached at [ben.dillon@geonetric.com](mailto:ben.dillon@geonetric.com) or 800/589-1171, or follow him on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/benatgeo](http://www.twitter.com/benatgeo).*

© 2011 Health Care Communications. All rights reserved. This article is used with permission of the publisher. Visit [www.strategichealthcare.com/pubs/ehealth](http://www.strategichealthcare.com/pubs/ehealth) for more information.