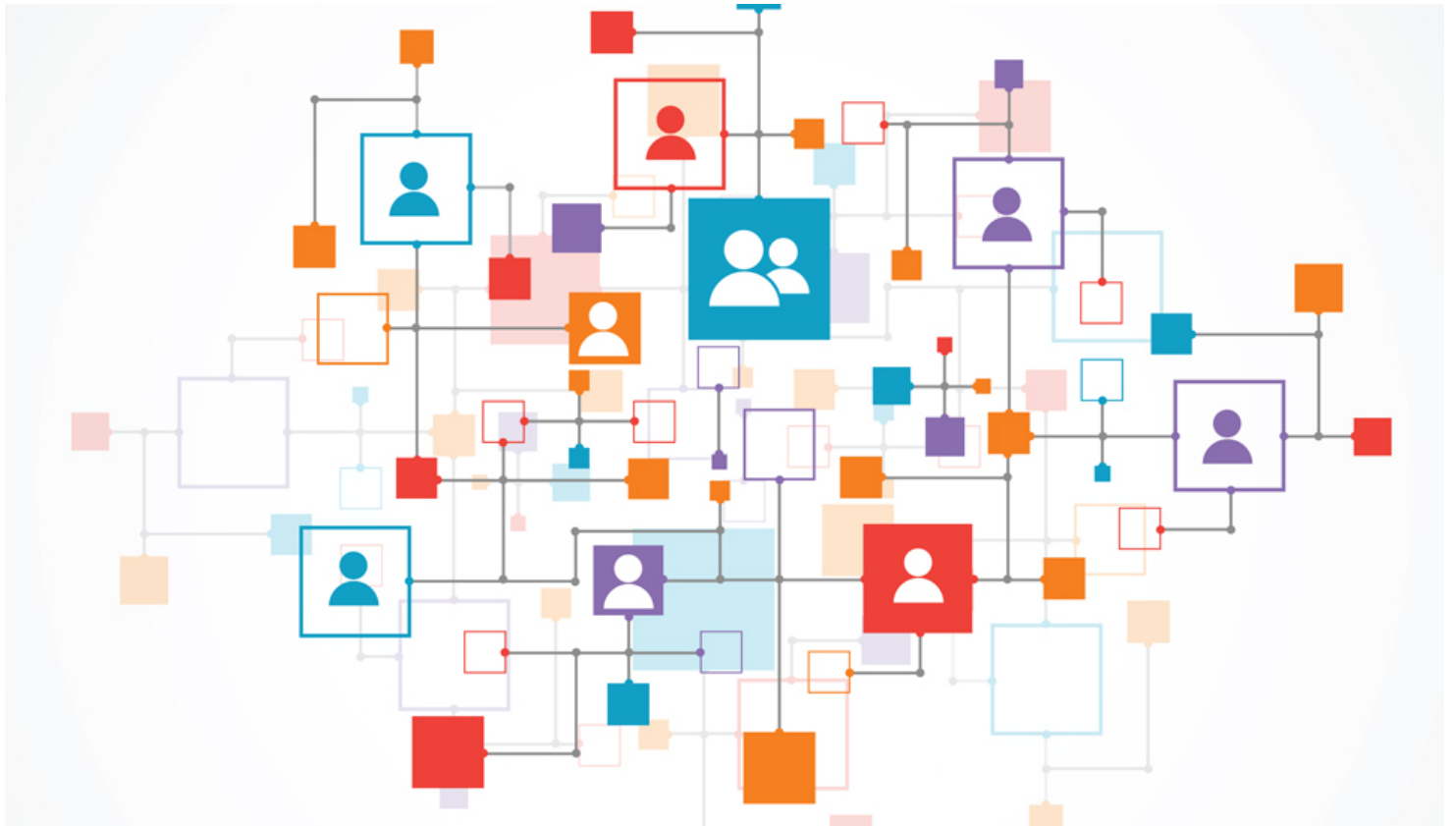


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Making a Difference, One Tweet at a Time

By Tiffani Sherman



Wen Dombrowski, MD, MBA

Some people see Twitter and other social media as a haven primarily for those who want to snark about celebrities or share pictures of cats. Others, like Wen Dombrowski, MD, MBA, see it as a means to influence social change involving health care, senior services and information technology.

“What I have been trying to do is influence the way the public thinks by sharing and engaging patients, doctors, technologists and business communities,” Dombrowski said. In other words, it’s a way of trying to change the masses and then have the masses make the change.

She has obviously struck a chord within the health care community: Dombrowski tops the Third Annual #HIT100 list, which recognizes the top contributors to the health information technology social media community. She has a big following on Twitter. Her already busy calendar is packed with speaking engagements.

To figure out how Dombrowski became the social media force of nature she is today, you have to look at her past. She identified medicine as a possible career choice at an early age while she was growing up in the Chicago area. “I’ve always been interested in the helping professions,” she said.

In high school, she assisted her school’s athletic trainers and was a volunteer with organizations that helped children with disabilities.

When studying at the University of Michigan, Dombrowski was torn between whether to pursue graduate training in social work, public health or medical school. “I realized I was interested in the health of people but also interested in what are the social and population variables of health,” she said. Eventually, she decided on medicine so she could better understand what caused the conditions that needed treating.

During her training at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and in other clinical settings after, Dombrowski earned a reputation for treating the complex patients others didn’t want to handle. “This is the population that needs the most help and would benefit the most from the help,” she said.

She realized those patients could easily fall through the cracks due to the complicated nature of their conditions. It helped her recognize the need for changes within health care to create a more patient-centered system. She began looking for ways she could facilitate that change. “A lot of those early experiences made me realize I wanted to try to fix the inefficiencies and gaps in health care,” she said. “I could either complain about it or try to change it.”

Early on she got involved with her hospital’s leadership committees, including hospital operations group, EMR advisory group, medical board executive committee and the ethics committee. Dombrowski went on to become a medical director at a special needs managed care plan for Medicaid-Medicare dual-eligible seniors and a clinical informatics director overseeing the EHR and data analytics at a multi-specialty network of outpatient practices in the Bronx.

Even though she wasn’t afraid to speak up about improving patient care, attempting to influence health care systems and public opinion on her own was difficult. “I realized change wasn’t happening fast enough,” Dombrowski said. “There wasn’t a real understanding of health care’s problems and solutions among health professionals and the general public.” She was troubled by the misinformation surrounding health care reform and the rhetoric about “death panels.”

Enter the phenomenon symbolized by a little blue bird. A couple years ago, a colleague had encouraged her to join and use Twitter, but “initially I didn’t understand why or how. I really didn’t have ambitious goals about it, I was just motivated by wanting to increase awareness of issues I thought were important,” she said. “I realized I couldn’t just sit back and let misinformation derail the much-needed improvements in health care delivery, payment and technology.”

So Dombrowski started tweeting using the name @HealthcareWen. She began by sharing thoughts and articles.

At first, it felt a little futile. “When I started, I felt like I was talking to nobody,” she said. But soon people began to follow and interact with her. “What is so exciting about social media is it gives everyone the opportunity to have a voice,” Dombrowski said.

Social media isn’t for everyone, and just because someone is on one platform doesn’t mean they need to be on them all, Dombrowski said. She finds Twitter useful to keep up with ideas and interact with people from different backgrounds from around the world. She is wary of people and companies that only use social media for marketing promotion of their services; people want information and value, she said. Twitter is also not the place for individual medical advice.

Her goal, she said, isn’t just to reach other geriatrics physicians like herself since she already has access to them through professional organizations. Her goal is to provoke thought and engage a wider audience.

The audience has obviously found her: Dombrowski now has nearly 9,000 Twitter followers. But it's not about the numbers, she said. Engagement is what matters. Many of Dombrowski's tweets spark online conversations that continue through direct messages and in-person meetings. Hearing some of her followers' thoughts and ideas leads to a higher level of conversation in person, Dombrowski said.

It isn't just younger people she's talking to. There is a growing number of Twitter users from the Baby Boomer generation and the so-called sandwich generation, the people caring for both children and aging parents. Many are looking for information from people such as Dombrowski. "Once I got the hang of Twitter, I realized this social media channel was really good for me -- sharing has always been part of who I am," she said.

She considers herself a physician leader, and recently accepted a new position as chief medical information officer and vice president for connected health at the Visiting Nurse Association Health Group.

"Ultimately I think health care can be better than what it is right now, so I want to be a part of shaping policy, care delivery, and patient/caregiver engagement," Dombrowski said. "You can either embrace change and realize this is a trend, or sit back and let the new paradigm run right past you."

Questions? Want to learn more? Wen Dombrowski can be reached on [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/in/WenDombrowski) (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/WenDombrowski>) or [Twitter](https://twitter.com/HealthcareWen) (<https://twitter.com/HealthcareWen>).

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