

The Power of Health Communities: Four Key Trends

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Align with health audiences where they are most engaged

Across a range of digital channels, health communities have arisen to support those living with chronic conditions, from multiple sclerosis and type 2 diabetes to breast cancer and irritable bowel disorder. But not all of these communities are equally successful in meeting their members' needs and helping them take steps toward healthier change.

Our audience research reveals core needs, hopes, and challenges for those living with chronic conditions. Today's top trends suggest that communities are most effective when they *empower* their members:

- To find support and build meaningful connections 3**
- To step into leading roles as content creators 6**
- By providing a safe environment and trustworthy content 10**
- By offering a community built uniquely for them 13**

For health marketers looking to reach those living with chronic conditions, it is critical to reach them in spaces that are built on a rigorous understanding of what today's audiences really want. It's in these communities that audiences are most likely to engage, return, listen, and learn.



Emotional Support Draws Members and Keeps Them Active

Offering meaningful connection is foundational for communities to reach and engage those living with chronic conditions.

From diagnosis onward, those living with chronic conditions are driven to look for something they can't get elsewhere: a community of people who understand what they're going through.



43% of those living with a health condition feel others don't understand their condition or experience.¹



69% said in a research study that they find community helpful at any stage of the condition journey.²

As online communities proliferate, those offering opportunities for meaningful emotional connection are best poised to gain new members and drive engagement and loyalty.



How marketers can drive audience engagement:

- Strike an empathetic tone and establish an emotional connection before introducing information.
- Speak to people at every stage of their experience, from diagnosis onward.
- Ensure messaging occurs within safe spaces where levels of trust are high.



Chronic condition community-seekers

While quality information is important, emotional connection is a top motivator for those seeking community.



70% of people who value online health communities do so with emotional support and inspiration as their primary reason.³



35% of people living with a chronic condition seek online or app-based communities for support and/or for health information.⁴



63% say that they want to hear about the experiences of people who have dealt with health challenges like theirs.⁵



Only 40% prefer health information that focuses on science over health experiences — compared to 55% of those without a health condition.⁶

Community Members Speak

“So happy to find a community that knows what I am experiencing. It’s been so hard for me to explain to my family, and I don’t think even then they believe my symptoms are so bad or even understand.”

–Ch4ndl3r7



“I have felt so alone with this and for once feel some sort of normal again knowing this isn’t all in my head. My concerns and questions, fatigue and pain, are the same as so many others.”

–Lynn17



“I research a lot and it is so good to be at a place where you can share and learn from those who understand.”

–Shanni



Content Creators Are Leaders — Let's Listen

Communities grow more vibrant when they harness the power of content creators, giving them space to take the lead, express themselves, and build a following.

Today, many of those living with chronic conditions look to content creators for inspiration and guidance. In fact, 44% of those with a health condition value or trust creator advice.⁷

That's why dedicated health communities are increasingly amplifying the voices of content creators, whether through social-first partnerships or by asking guides to share their expertise through platform-specific content.

It's not about having millions of followers — today, the trend is toward quality connection and tight-knit engagement. Communities of every size can build trust and belonging by expanding the role of ambassadors — who truly know communities, how to speak to them, and how to build a loyal following.





How marketers can drive audience engagement:

- Partner directly with content creators, as they command high levels of audience trust.
- Collaborate with creators for valuable follower feedback and authentic audience insights.
- Look to creators to understand emerging narratives about what it means to live with a health condition.





Content creators as community leaders

Influencers are increasingly central to health communities, as they build engagement and loyalty by offering:

Stories.

Narratives are relatable and help organize difficult experiences, giving them meaning.

Insights.

Creators share lived experiences relating to symptom management.

Authenticity.

Creators provide a window into the real challenges of having a health condition.



Relatability.

Content that shares daily experiences can spark recognition and normalize experiences.

Validation.

Community leaders can foster opportunities for shared vulnerability.

Diversity.

Unique voices expand awareness of what it means to live with a health condition.

Content Creators Speak

Living with diabetes can be stressful and confusing, so it's a continual learning process. Even in creating my own content, there's so much I learn every day.

– **Mila Clarke**

Type 2 Diabetes Advocate
@TheHangryWoman



I truly don't know where I would be today without the experience of writing and sharing my story with others who understand the unique hurdles of navigating daily chronic pain.

– **Natalie Sayre**

Migraine Advocate
@mindfulnatalie



Being able to put words and voice to this thing that lives with me has been huge in terms of acceptance, growth, and healing around my condition.

– **Erin Vore**

Multiple Sclerosis Advocate
@erinvore



Not everyone wants to decipher the newest studies. I try to break down that content and present it in a very accessible way so they can discuss it with their doctors.

– **Eileen Zollinger**

*Migraine Advocate,
co-founder of Migraine Strong*



Safety and Accuracy Are Foundational to Trust

Those with chronic conditions are rightly concerned about online privacy and misinformation. Dedicated communities are uniquely able to protect their members.

About 40% of people use social sites to consume health information, but less than 15% post information themselves, likely due to privacy concerns.⁸

Meanwhile, health misinformation remains rampant — and many remain vulnerable. Without protections in place, inaccurate information can quickly spread between peers.

As community stewards, publishers and companies are leading the way in creating purposeful spaces where safety and privacy are foundational and all information is medically reviewed.

Seekers can come to these communities with full confidence that their safety is actively protected and what they learn is accurate. A real sense of trust can blossom — and with trust, engagement grows.

Trust is foundational to engagement. Although about 40% of people use social sites to consume health information, less than 15% post information themselves, likely due to privacy concerns.



How marketers can drive audience engagement:



- Look for environments that offer brand safety by weeding out inaccurate, inappropriate, and spammy content.
- Communicate the accuracy and sourcing of any health information.
- Ensure resources are accessible and understandable for most people, which includes keeping medical jargon to a minimum.



Even informed audiences face misinformation

1

Increased awareness of misinformation means a majority of Americans are appropriately skeptical about health information on social media sites.⁹

2

Emotions can be misleading nonetheless — anxiety about health or misplaced trust in others can both lead to believing inaccurate resources.

3

Time and effort required to dig for good information online can be a barrier, with 6 in 10 reporting frustration during this process — it's often easier to rely on peers.¹⁰

4

Searching online for health information remains popular for at least 6 in 10 Americans, speaking to an ongoing need for good guidance.¹¹



Audience Understandings Are a Road Map Forward

Rigor in understanding audiences is foundational to building and evolving communities that truly work for their members.

When it comes to community, one size doesn't fit all. Effective digital communities draw on rigorous audience understanding to create the user experiences that people want.

Putting audiences front and center means including the features and capabilities the group is most likely to use, as well as appropriate imagery and truly useful content tailored to the audience's needs.

When a community is developed uniquely for an audience, it encourages deep engagement.

Ongoing research is the best way to understand group needs and stay in touch as they evolve. Continual audience listening makes it possible to develop and refresh communities so that they truly fit the needs of their specific members.



How marketers can drive audience engagement:

- Ensure that audience listening is both a first step and an ongoing process.
- Recognize that different chronic condition groups may have different motivations for seeking out community.
- Use myriad ways to reach audiences — text, images, video, live interaction, and other formats may appeal to different groups.



Unique community needs

Community members tell us they find these offerings most helpful:¹²

One-to-one, empathetic connection. During a potentially isolating experience, people need to share feelings in a space where they will be understood.

Key audience: Multiple sclerosis

Safe opportunities for group interaction, such as comments and live discussions. Group spaces offer understanding and empathy, without unsolicited judgements.

Key audience: Type 2 diabetes

Information in a personal context, including real-life stories. Those with health conditions want to hear from those who have been through it all before.

Key audience: Breast cancer

Resources for younger members. Even those who find social support elsewhere may enjoy videos, chats, and social media tie-ins about condition management.

Key audience: Irritable bowel disorder

New treatment advice, from experts and peers. This can include healthcare insights, alternative remedies, and hearing about others' treatment journeys.

Key audience: Migraine headache



Bringing people living with chronic conditions together

Through purposeful communities, we can engage and connect with audiences.

When we understand why those living with chronic conditions seek out and engage with communities, we as health marketers can better align with their needs, reach them where they are, and drive engagement. Keep in mind that these trends define today's most effective health communities:

Emotional connection is *the* most powerful motivating force, more than facts alone. The best communities are built on in-depth understanding of specific emotional needs.

Safe, protected environments that are dedicated to health accuracy are a must if members are to trust the information they find and engage with confidence.

Thriving community environments give members space to take the lead as content creators, who are powerful forces for shaping narratives and building loyalty.

Ongoing rigor in understanding audiences is foundational to building feature-rich platforms that offer members what they want and have a positive impact on their lives.



Visit [HealthlineMedia.com](https://www.healthline.com) to learn more about Bezy chronic condition communities. For more information on this report, please [email us](mailto:info@healthline.com) or contact your Healthline Media representative.

- 1 Healthline Media PIL studies, 2019-2020. Study conducted among people living with rheumatoid arthritis (N=756), psoriasis (N=608), psoriatic arthritis (N=432) Crohn's (N=300), ulcerative colitis (N=400), breast cancer (N=505), and Leukemia (N=179)
- 2 Chronic Conditions Qualitative Research. May 2021. Insights based on 72 respondents across 10 chronic conditions
- 3 Bezy Audience Survey. June 2021. Study conducted among 992 Healthline Media app and site users living with one of 7 conditions
- 4, 7 Healthline Social Influencer Study. Jan 2020. Study conducted among 1,000 people living with a chronic condition
- 5, 6 Healthline Media Landscape Segmentation Study. Dec 2020. Insights based among 88 people living with one of 7 chronic conditions who value community experiences
- 8 Solberg, Lauren B. 2014. The Benefits of Online Health Communities. <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/benefits-online-health-communities/2014-04>
- 9 Shandwick, Weber. 2018. Americans Do Not Fully Trust Social Media for Health Information, According to New Weber Shandwick Study. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/americans-do-not-fully-trust-social-media-for-health-information-according-to-new-weber-shandwick-study-300749232.html>
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- 11 Majority of Adults Look Online for Health Information. 2013. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/02/01/majority-of-adults-look-online-for-health-information/>
- 12 Based on Bezy app analytics from Mix Panel. 2020

