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EDUCATOR AND TRAINEE PERSPECTIVES

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Leveraging Social Media to Enhance Recruitment Efforts in Fellowship Training Programs

Social media (SoMe) has become a prominent resource for the medical community because it provides an avenue for professional networking, collaboration, research dissemination, educational resources, and advocacy.¹ The coronavirus disease-2019 pandemic expanded the use of SoMe, and the subsequent transition to virtual interviews created an opportunity for fellowship and other training programs across the globe to adapt recruitment strategies.² SoMe became an integral platform for fellowship programs to highlight the mission, goals, culture, and strengths of their programs.

Gastroenterology is one of the most competitive specialties in the internal medicine fellowship match. Implementing a thoughtful SoMe strategy with a focus on key elements can help ensure that fellowship programs continue to attract qualified and diverse applicants, thereby creating a diverse future generation of gastroenterologists. Here, we offer a practical SoMe guide for fellowship programs focused on optimizing recruitment, providing an authentic representation of the program's culture, showcasing scholarship and departmental achievements, highlighting social events, celebrating diversity, and promoting equity and inclusion.

Getting Started

Establishing a digital presence for a fellowship program should begin with researching the institutional SoMe policies, obtaining formal permission for account creation, and learning about any restrictions regarding sharing content.

SoMe committees should be assembled with consideration of each potential member's familiarity with various digital platforms, prior experience with content creation or digital design, and ability to generate engaging content reflective of the culture of the fellowship program. The committee can include fellows at different stages of training and faculty members. Once the team has been formed, it is important to establish specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound goals. An example of a hypothetical goal statement is "To enhance diversity of talent in our gastroenterology fellowship program, we aspire to achieve an increase by 30% of applications from diverse backgrounds and underrepresented minorities this cycle. This will be achieved through strategic posts and targeted engagement through our fellowship's most visible SoMe platform."

Platform selection should be based on the target audience. Using multiple platforms can help maximize the program's digital reach and could be duplicative where possible to reduce the time involved. Once the committee has been formed, the goals have been outlined, and the platforms have been selected, building an audience begins with following other gastroenterology (GI) fellowship programs, residency programs, professional GI societies, medical journals, and diversity groups. The team should be trained and well versed in effectively sharing social media content. This can be accomplished by outlining basic SoMe use tips and tricks to getting started, use of hashtags, strategic tagging, and engaging with other accounts^{1,3} (Figure 1).

Structured Approach

Assigning clear roles to each team member based on respective strengths and interests can help maintain an effective and organized effort. These roles include event organization, photography, content curation, and posting. Creating a photograph and video bank improves the ease of access to material for potential posts. Different types of content can be assigned to each platform. For instance, Instagram (Meta Platforms, Menlo Park, CA) may offer features such as reels, live stories, and highlights that are well suited for showcasing social events, wellness, or fellow takeovers, whereas Twitter (Twitter, Inc, San Francisco, CA) can be a powerful tool to share educational content, curriculum information, scholarly work, and departmental achievements. Scheduling regular posting several times per week with themed content by team members with administrative access decreases the workload of individual team members, maintains consistency and control of content, and increases the yield.⁴ Launching a theme-based approach such as "Faculty Friday," "Training Tip Tuesday," and "Where Are They Now Wednesday" can give the account a sense of organization and the target audience something to look forward to. Other popular content that can be adapted include #ScholarlySundays, #SocialSaturdays, and #MentoringMondays. This approach also can minimize the effort required to synthesize ideas for new posts. SoMe also can be used to show that the program supports the larger virtual diverse GI community by planning ahead for posts related to various advocacy days such as "Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month,"

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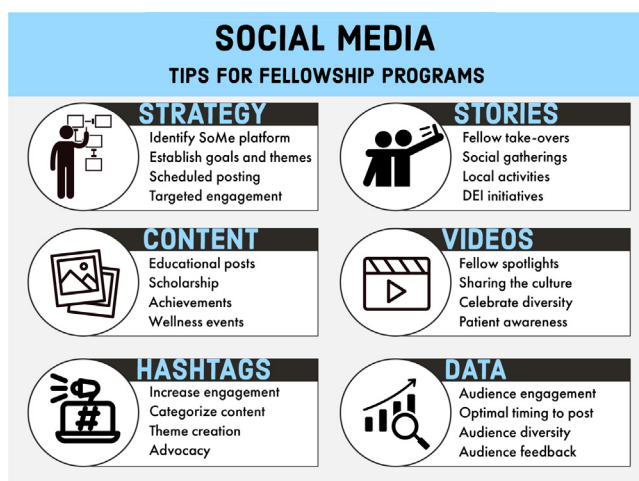


Figure 1. Tips for fellowship programs to leverage social media (SoMe). DEI, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

“World Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) Day,” “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ+) Pride and Awareness,” “Black History Month,” “Hispanic Heritage Month,” “Women in Medicine Month,” “Women Physicians Day,” and many others. For educational content, planning weekly themes such as “esophagus week” or “GI bleeding week” also can be considered.

Highlighting the Program’s Culture

SoMe also can be a powerful tool to showcase a program’s culture by featuring extracurricular and wellness events, current faculty and trainees, and content reflective of the program’s mission, vision, and values.⁵ Posting “Fellow Spotlights” to introduce the fellows, their interests, their reasons for selecting the program, and what they cherish about it can provide insight about the program’s culture and what current fellows value the most. These posts also can display the program’s interest in the fellows as individuals and in supporting their interests and career goals. Highlighting trainees who educate, advocate, and engage in scholarly activities shows that the program fosters a collegial learning environment. Sharing and promoting posts from the pages of other departments within the institution portrays a sense of collaboration. Posts focused on mentorship opportunities and mentor–mentee relationships should be included regularly.

“Fellow takeover” has become a popular feature that allows fellows to post on the program’s SoMe page for a dedicated period of time to convey what “a day in the

life” of a fellow at the program can entail.⁴ “Ask us anything” sessions with program directors or chief fellows can offer an avenue for bidirectional communication with prospective applicants to learn more about the program. Content dedicated to showcasing fellow social events outside of work, other wellness events, program retreats, community outreach, and local activities emphasizes the value placed on wellness.

Showcasing Scholarship, Education, and Departmental Achievements

SoMe can be a great avenue for sharing fellow and faculty academic accomplishments including awards, publications, grants, society involvement, committee participation, and leadership positions. Photographs of fellows and faculty at conferences showcase divisional involvement at the local, national, and international level. Offering virtual access to select faculty lectures improves the visibility of the program. Posts highlighting alumni including any further educational endeavors or fellowships they have pursued after completing their GI fellowship shows unwavering support for their accomplishments and can showcase the successful careers of alumni to applicants. SoMe also can be used to participate in posting engaging educational content such as tweetorials,⁶ quiz polls, journal club, “photo of the week,” or “tip of the day” derived from program faculty teaching points and structured GI educational initiatives such as #MondayNightIBD, #ScopingSundays, and #GIJournalClub.⁷ These SoMe scholarship and education efforts not only can enhance recruitment, but also can be incorporated into one’s curriculum vitae.⁷

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Residents from under-represented minorities look forward to joining a program in which they will have equal opportunities for growth and retention as well as equitable access to leadership roles during fellowship and beyond. Hence, it is important to ensure diversity and inclusivity from the top-down and from the bottom-up within a fellowship program and to showcase this diversity through SoMe. The program’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) can be shown by posting content that highlights the program’s initiatives and commitment to allyship and inclusivity.⁸ This includes posts showing initiatives promoting a

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supportive environment for women in GI that shed light on issues such as parental leave, lactation services, wellness support, and so forth. Posts should detail the specifics of mentorship and leadership opportunities, showcase curriculum content focused on under-represented groups, and incorporate engagement with accounts that foster DEI (eg, @blackgastro, @southasianIBD, @itsLGBTQhealth, @womeninendoscopy, and so forth). Furthermore, ensuring that all trainees, including members of historically under-represented groups, have an equal opportunity to participate in “fellow takeovers” and are promoted equitably on SoMe can provide some insight into the culture of the program for applicants who are looking to ensure they will be supported and represented. If the program is successful at recruiting talent from diverse backgrounds, posts should include discussions about the subsequent strategies to ensure a sense of belonging, safety, and wellness in the workplace, where macroaggressions and microaggressions are promptly addressed with specific systems in place and where all employees act as upstanders for DEI.

Assess and Adapt

Once the program’s digital presence has been established, the engagement metrics of select posts provided by the SoMe platform can be analyzed. If certain types of media (reels, pictures, videos) receive higher engagement, future posts can be adapted accordingly. If the audience engaging with most posts seem to lack diversity, more targeted efforts should be made through post content modifications, program initiatives, and SoMe interactions to ensure a more diverse audience. All photographs to be posted should be reviewed regularly for potential Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act issues and for optics consideration. Intentionally scheduling posts on days of the week or times of the day with the highest level of engagement can help increase the program’s visibility. Finally, engaging with the target audience by asking for feedback using polls or open-ended questions, such as “how can we help you learn more about our program?” potentially can lead to more successful recruiting approaches.

Conclusions

With a thoughtful SoMe strategy, fellowship programs will be able to showcase the program’s

culture, mission, educational and scholarship initiatives, clinical innovations, personal accomplishments, and commitment to DEI. This can provide an overview to prospective fellowship applicants, particularly in an era of virtual interviews for which a program needs applicants to experience the culture of the program through such means as SoMe.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors disclose no conflicts.