By now you’re more than familiar with the names Twitter, Facebook and YouTube -- the big three in social-media. You’ve probably asked yourself, and have been asked by others, ‘Why don’t you have a presence in one, if not all, of these venues?’

Your answers may have ranged from “Why should I?” to “I don’t even know how to get started.” Those responses are not surprising, says Nancy Lecroy, senior faculty member of The Beryl Institute, a 1,700-member organization dedicated to improving customer service in healthcare.

“I think physicians are a little skittish,” Lecroy says. “Their first hurdle is just, ‘How do I get started?’ And many of them make it a bigger task than it needs to be.” A lot of physicians don’t even have a website, she notes. “Put your toe in the water with the first step, and make sure you have an Internet presence,” she says.

Connecting with Customers

A white paper released by Fanscape Inc., highlights the four main reasons businesses should be using social media. All four -- marketing, public relations, market research and customer service -- are geared to do the same thing: Connect the physician with his or her current and potential customers. According to Beryl’s Lecroy, it’s about strategy -- and it all starts with a physician understanding his or her patients.

“‘What are [patients’] expectations of how they engage, and want to engage, their physicians and work with them to maintain better health?’ she asks. Some younger patients do a lot of research first; they want to learn as much about a physician as they can. Giving them the information, and managing that information, is the first step to creating positive perceptions -- and ensuring that patient finds in you what he or she needs.”

Lecroy says having a website is critical. Facebook and Twitter may give people an impression of what they can expect of the physician, but those tools will drive them to more content. That’s where the practice’s website comes in.

“Patients may want to go online and get any pre-registration or new-patient information forms filled out in advance,” she says. “They’re going to go online and look for those forms so that by the time they get to the physician’s office, they’re ready to go.”

Myriad Uses of Social Media

Lecroy recalls finding a pediatrician on Facebook who is not posting anything except his contact information. The rest of the posts on his site are from patients, who are posting photos of their children, noting how wonderful the pediatrician is, and what the doctor was able to do for their son or daughter.

“‘That’s a great testimonial,’” Lecroy says. “[The physician] isn’t doing anything; he has his patients doing it. But he’s creating a following by setting the tone for how his Facebook is being used.”

There are many simple things physicians can do to emphasize what sets them apart from others. Using Facebook and Twitter to talk about health and wellness is relatively easy. How do you know what information your patients want? Lecroy says, just ask them.

“If you have diabetic patients, Twitter a message to all your online diabetes patients, or to all individuals with diabetes, with reminders to check their insulin level,” Lecroy suggests. “Or for heart patients, reminders to check their blood pressure.” It’s not just preventative, but compliance, she says, making sure patients are compliant with the little things they need to do every day to stay in good health and manage their chronic conditions.

Make Sure It’s Used Appropriately

Lecroy says that it’s easy enough for physicians to have a staff member assigned the responsibility of maintaining the practice’s Web presence. The key, of course, is to make certain the staff member views it as a priority. Regardless of whether you use Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, the more current the information, the more satisfied
your patients are going to be. The last thing you want to do is promote a service online that you’re no longer doing.

And when it comes to HIPAA and privacy issues, Lecroy points out that physicians should not be using these social media tools to establish a dialogue with patients, but rather as an opportunity to engage the community. “It could be as simple as posting that the practice is doing back-to-school physicals,” says Lecroy. “Put a link on your Facebook page that takes [patients] right to your website to schedule an appointment, or gives them a phone number to call.”

After all, what better way is there for patients to receive a positive association, and a chance to connect with you, right away?