

# Health care information – Where do you go? Who do you trust?

## Balancing expertise, access and tradition

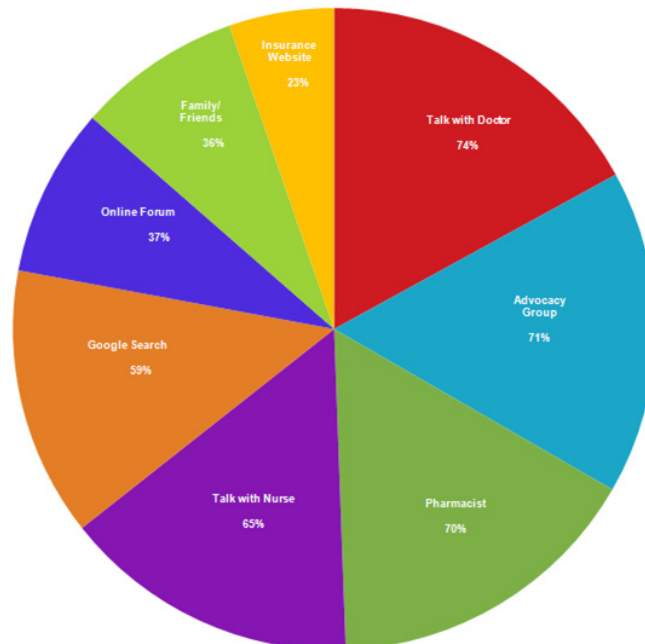
When you ask what's new in health care, the federal reform package tops the list – but it's not the only development people and the industry need to adapt to. The way we seek, share and evaluate health information on a personal level is also undergoing rapid change, thanks to a combination of online technology and the groups and forums that are using it to disseminate knowledge.

How do people navigate this new information landscape? How has it changed the sources people turn to – or the trust they place in them? Do these behaviors differ by race, age or gender?

In a national survey conducted April 28-29, 2010, Capstrat and Public Policy Polling sought insight into the ways Americans receive information on health care. Some of our findings matched preconceptions, but there were a number of surprises.

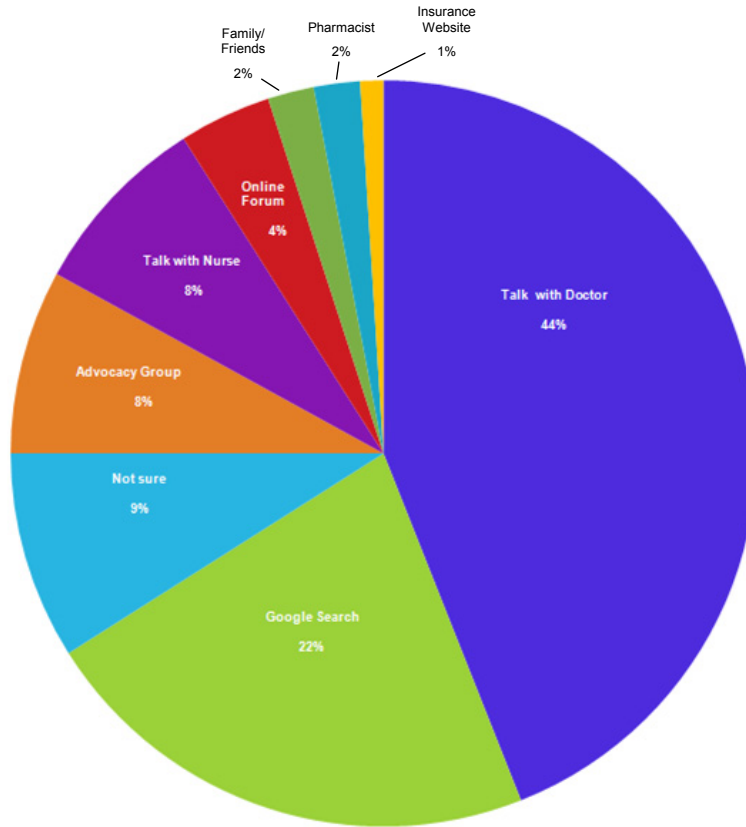
Asked what groups or information sources they found “reliable,” respondents gave doctors the highest marks. Pharmacists scored high as well. But pharmacists were edged out by advocacy groups – perhaps indicating that broad access to the Internet means local sources no longer hold a monopoly on people's trust.

In a similar surprise, Google searches ranked fifth – below most classes of health care professionals, but still judged reliable by a majority of respondents.



\*Percentage of respondents rating the following groups 'somewhat reliable' or 'extremely reliable'  
Capstrat-Public Policy Poll, April 2010

More surprises emerged when we asked respondents which sources of health information were “most influential.” Because this question was asked in the context of “the last time you needed information on a health issue,” it may serve as a measure of day-to-day practice, in contrast to the more theoretical test of the earlier “reliability” question. And here, Google searches came in a surprising second, far surpassing every information source except medical doctors.



\*Percentage of respondents ranking the following sources as the most influential source the last time they sought health information.  
Capstrat-Public Policy Poll, April 2010

This finding may reflect an “information-on-demand” environment in which people are accustomed to instant answers. While survey respondents hold the counsel of MDs in high esteem, the reality of modern health care makes it difficult to have a direct conversation with a doctor without arranging an actual office visit. When people turn to Google for health information instead, is this a first step? A last step? Or some sort of triage process that helps them decide when to seek professional care? This is an area that calls for more research.

It’s clear that the “wisdom of crowds” isn’t yet an influential force in health care. When consumers do use online health communities, the top reason is the 24/7 access they offer – like Google, forums never close. There is also some evidence that forums might be gaining traction with African-Americans relative to other groups.

In fact, the poll identified several notable trends among African-Americans. Google scored considerably higher in that community than in the survey population as a whole, in both reliability (68 percent versus 59 overall) and influence (32 percent versus 22 overall.) African-American respondents also found online forums more reliable (55 percent versus 27 percent overall.)

More surprising, African-American respondents found doctors much less reliable than the base (50 percent versus 74 percent overall) and rated doctors much lower in the influence they had over their last search for health information (36 percent versus 52 percent.) They also rated insurers' sites lower than average (14 percent versus 23 percent.)

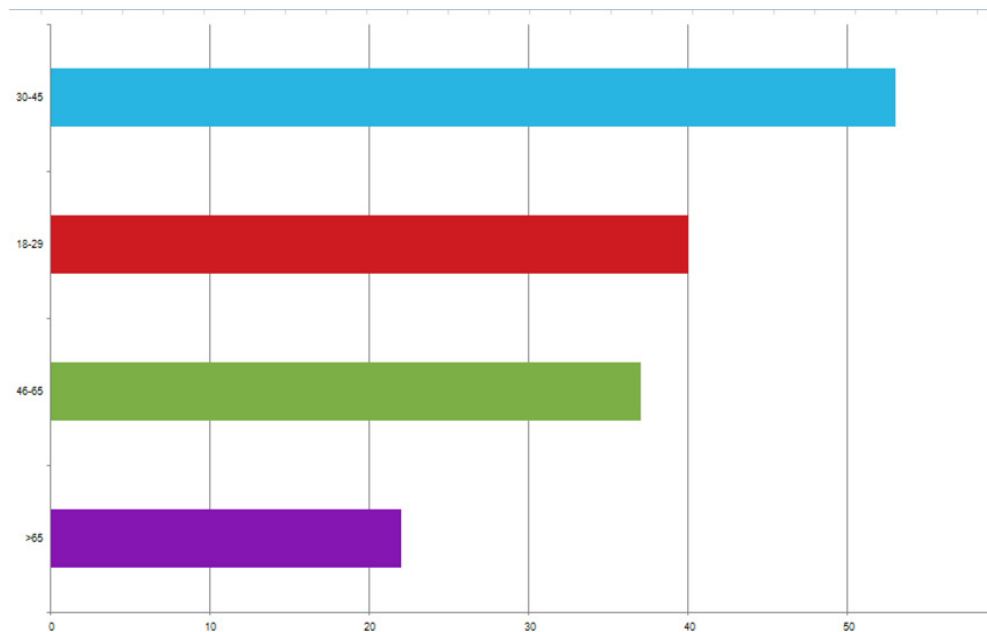
This likely reflects well-documented disparities in access to care. If experience has taught a person that getting to a doctor is difficult, other sources of information are likely to fill the gap. Similarly, individuals without insurance are unlikely to look to insurers as a source of information – and the low rate of insurance among African-Americans is a long-standing problem.

This finding highlights an opportunity for insurers to reach out to the African-American community with a specific focus on the information they offer, including (for insured members) nursing hotlines, disease management programs and other health initiatives.

We also found interesting splits along gender lines. For example, women are much more likely than men (70 percent versus 59 percent) to view nurses as reliable sources of information. Women are more likely than men to seek out friends and family for health information (40 percent versus 32 percent); to have used Google in their most recent searches for health information; (46 percent versus 28 percent) and to consider Google reliable (26 percent versus 17 percent.) This suggests health information providers may have an opportunity to strengthen online offerings on women's health issues such as osteoporosis, breast cancer and prenatal care.

Depending on the demographic group with which a health information provider seeks to communicate, the survey also identified notable age-related trends. For example, only 25 percent of respondents less than 29 years of age considered pharmacists reliable sources of information, versus 70 percent for the base and 83 percent in the 30- to 45-year-old cohort. This may reflect a sense of nostalgia among the older crowd – many of whom probably still view pharmacists as local notables and influential townspeople. In contrast, young people may be more likely to perceive pharmacists as retail employees, a role that is increasingly common as chain operations replace sole-proprietor stores.

“Generation Xers,” typically defined as those born between the early 1960s and the early 1980s after the preceding “Baby Boomers,” also seem to stand out in terms of how they view online forums. They are the only age group among whom a majority considered forums to be reliable.



\*Gen-X tops in considering online forums reliable  
 Percent of respondents considering online forums 'somewhat reliable' or 'extremely reliable' by age  
 Capstrat-Public Policy Poll, April 2010

What's next? The past year has brought tremendous changes in the health care and communications landscape. It's impossible to predict what will occur in the coming months, but here are three things to watch:

- **New FDA guidelines** will affect the way pharmaceutical companies, advocacy groups and others communicate online. These rules may add credibility. Or they may reduce the amount of information and discussion that can occur.
- **Mobile adoption** is poised to transform health care information access. Patients and their physicians will now have real-time access to information while interacting. Increased use of smart phones may bolster the influence of online information sources.
- **Pharmaceutical companies** are becoming more comfortable using the online arena, including **social media**. Will patients and providers accept and embrace information when these familiar sources offer it through new channels?

Capstrat will continue polling on this topic in the coming months. Stay tuned to find out how attitudes regarding various sources of health care information are changing.