In-person a no-go, so residency program told its story on Instagram

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When the pandemic took hold last year, the world as we knew it changed. For resident physicians and prospective residents, the workplace became more stressful and the ability to socialize in person became almost nonexistent. The pediatrics residency program at University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland turned to social media to change that.

After surveying medical students about their preferred social media platform, the program moved to remake its Instagram presence from one that was primarily a platform for current residents and alumni to one that addressed a broader audience. The ultimate result allowed Children’s Hospital Oakland to showcase methods for resident well-being, key program details for applicants and its residents’ commitment to social change.

The strategy and execution of the social media program were highlighted during the recent AMA ChangeMedEd® 2021 conference.

Well-being on display

There was a strategy element to building out an effective Instagram page. Residents and faculty worked with the marketing department and determined what they wanted to show and how they wanted to create the messages.

One key element to relay to residents in the program—and those coming in—was how they could maintain personal wellness during a highly stressful period. To do that, Children’s Hospital Oakland created posts that centered on teamwork, well-being activities and peer appreciation.


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“The residents were spending less time together, due to social distancing rules, both in the hospital and out,” said April Zaat, MD, associate program director of the pediatrics residency at Children’s Hospital Oakland. “It was kind of hard to get to know people with masks on, so this offered us a little bit of an opportunity to get to know people.”

Learn about research from the AMA finding that half of health workers reported burnout amid COVID-19.

A day in the life

Without in-person interviews and campus visits, gaining an understanding of the day-to-day experience at a residency program posed a major challenge for residency applicants. Children’s Hospital Oakland used Instagram to meet that challenge.

To relay that information, residents posted Instagram stories following them around throughout their day from clinical experiences to academic venues and even to lunch.

“Last year’s recruitment season made it really difficult for applicants to get a feel for our program and what living in Oakland is like, without the usual interview days and social events,” said Jasmine Mikami, MD, a chief resident in the program during the last recruitment cycle. “Through our Instagram, we really wanted applicants to get a sense of what it would be like to be part of our residency program and what our day-to-day lives look like in residency.”

The social media outreach proved effective.

In a survey conducted of incoming interns, 95% said they followed the program’s Instagram account. When incoming applicants were asked what gave them the best overall sense of the program, one-third picked the Instagram account as the most influential. That was roughly the same percentage that cited interview day as their top factor in gaining a sense of the program.

Gain insight on how social media can help an applicant’s residency program research.

Values on display
2020 was a challenging year, and those challenges went beyond the pandemic. Issues of structural racism were brought to the forefront of the national discourse.

“We, as a program, choose to intentionally speak out on these issues,” said Payal Desai, MD, a third-year pediatrics resident. “Not only as a way to show our solidarity with the broader Oakland community and our presence at events and demonstrations, but also to reflect the values we hold important and essential to our residency program. Additionally, we hope to call in our fellow pediatric colleagues to use their own platform and privilege as physicians to advocate for systemic change.”

To create the type of content that spoke to the program’s values, members of the residency worked with the larger hospital system, highlighting the residency program’s efforts and what was happening in hospital, using a team approach to create thoughtful and intentional posts.