



Using social media in professional practice; benefits and pitfalls

Ro Huntriss, dietitian and social media influencer talks to consultant dietitian Sophie Medlin

Sophie

Hello and welcome to the ProConnect podcast series, aiming to inform and connect healthcare professionals on a range of subjects outside of clinical practice. I'm Sophie Medlin, a consultant dietitian based in London, and today we're talking virtually to dietitian and social media influencer Ro Huntriss about the use of social media in professional practice.

Welcome to the podcast Ro! Social media can be such a useful tool, but it's important to think about the risks and benefits, especially when using it in a professional capacity. Can you tell us a bit about yourself, how you became a dietitian and what your journey has been so far?

Ro

My name is Ro Huntress. I am a registered dietitian. I'm based in London. I actually started my career in the NHS back in 2011 and was there until 2017. Since then I've branched off into a number of different things. I have my own business and I support different brands and businesses with nutrition consultancy. I also have an online platform called *Fertility Dietitian UK*, where we support patients on their fertility journeys and, also, we support healthcare professionals with fertility nutrition education and also I work quite heavily in health tech.

Sophie

Yeah, perfect. So on that note then, when did you first start to use social media in a professional capacity and how do you use it to promote your own business and activities? And how has that sort of grown and developed?

Ro

Yeah, so I actually started in the NHS in 2011 and I was there until the end of 2017. And just as I was starting my new chapter, I was moving into digital health and then I knew that I wanted to further grow my freelance career. So, actually, after I left the NHS at the beginning of 2018, that is when I started my first page. So my first page is *@dietitianRo* on Instagram and I choose to really focus my efforts on Instagram above other platforms. And to be honest, when I went into it, I was like, I'm not too sure what I'm doing, but I just wanted to start a conversation. I wasn't entirely sure what that conversation was going to be, but I wanted it to be a mix of the stuff that I was going to be doing on my new adventure post NHS Life and also sharing nutrition information. So then over time that page has grown and evolved and yeah, it has been a really great steer in terms of the direction in which I've gone in. When I was on social media originally, a lot of what I was doing was about growth and trying to build my page and establish a network and maybe get noticed by brands that I may want to work with.

I don't have a huge page. It's just under 13,000. There are people with much greater size in terms of pages. But I found actually when I hit around 5,000 followers, that was when I started to notice that I was getting a little bit of attention from other brands and businesses and, I don't know,



opportunities were just starting to come up a little bit more and I think many people find this when they have an Instagram page; it can have one sort of purpose, but then it can actually evolve over time. And what I actually see it as being now is kind of a bit of like an online CV for myself, like just an online platform, so that I'm visible there, known to people within the dietetic network, but also, you know, to brands, businesses that I may work with now or, you know, could potentially work with in the future. And I know obviously you've got your social media page as well. So I don't know if it's similar for you, but I actually don't drive the growth of my page as much as I used to. For me, I kind of said in my mind I wanted to get to 10,000 followers on that page and I was quite happy there. So I post much less frequently than I did previously, and it tends to be now just kind of like updates in terms of what I'm doing. And whereas previously I might be posting three times a week, now it could be as little as once a month, like once or twice a month. But for me that page is serving its purpose and it's still slightly on the up. But I'm kind of happy with that. And that's where it is.

Now, I mentioned Fertility Nutrition before and in January of 2020, that was when I set up my other page which is *@Fertility.dietitian.UK*. The thing with this page is it's a niche. So if somebody wants to really grow a page and you know, become like an expert, or become that known person within an industry, to have a niche, it's so useful. It's powerful. And that was my first online niche - fertility nutrition. You know, it's a niche topic anyway but I was really homing in on this, and I absolutely loved creating this platform. And now actually, so I'd say that it's very much evidence-based information, but it's solving a problem. It's solving a problem for people. My other page *@dietitianRo* doesn't solve a problem. This one does. And actually, I was waiting for this to happen, but my fertility page, I think within the past month has finally overtaken my *@dietitianRo* page, which I'm glad about because as I say, this page is really serving a purpose and helping others. Yeah there's been many opportunities that have come off the back of basically what started as an Instagram page.

Sophie

There's a few things in there that are super important to pick up. One is that if you are in a marketing sense, if you try to talk to everybody, you're actually talking to nobody, aren't you? That's the problem. It's nutrition because if you're trying to be super general, you're saying eat your 5 a day, drink plenty of water, blah, blah, blah. Nobody's really engaging with that. Whereas when you are speaking to a very specific audience, I guess for me it's like colorectal stuff, it's much easier to build an audience because people know what they're there for and what advice they're going to get and it's what they really want. And also one of the things I think you said really nicely is that brands, and even universities and other people that you might be interested in working with, actually you being super authentic and yourself and sharing what you're doing that's how they'll find you and think, 'Oh yeah, I want to work with her. She's brilliant'. And I think that those things that you're doing across both of those platforms, I think it's brilliant and a really great demonstration of both of those things.

Do you think social media is useful way to network? Have you made some useful, meaningful contacts?



Ro

I was thinking about this before. You know, when I was in the NHS, because I was in the NHS working with a dietitian you know as well, Nicola Ludlam Raine. And she had a really big social media following kind of like back in the day before social media was a thing and, you know, I didn't have any social media. The only dietitians that I knew were in my NHS Trust, or people that I'd been to university with and maybe an occasional one or two here and there, but like my network was actually so small and that was one of the most amazing things that has come from social media for me. Especially on my *@dietitianRo* page but even on my fertility one, to be honest, there's a really reasonable audience size in terms of like dietitians and nutritionists - and other healthcare professionals as well.

Now it's great. I'll go to conferences and they're like, 'Oh, you're Dietitian Ro!' and I'm like, 'Oh, you're whatever your Instagram name is'. So it's amazing because the reach is just huge. And what I do really like actually on Instagram is I do feel that, for the most part, it's a really supportive community. There's enough room for everybody to grow and succeed. It's not just that there must only be one dietitian, you know, who is the best on social media. It's not like that at all. So it's actually yeah, a really supportive, really supportive network. So very grateful for the network that I've developed and the contacts that come through that.

Sophie

You and I wouldn't know each other if it wasn't for social media. I think it's remarkable how much it's allowed us to grow and develop and to speak to patients and other people, but also, you know, other dietitians and other healthcare professionals.

In your opinion, then, what do you think is the best channel to use, obviously we are where we are now, but if you were starting again, do you think you would start with a different platform or where do you think you are with that?

Ro

Instagram is definitely the one for me and I've never ventured into Twitter (now X) and the thing is it's like I've heard and seen negative things on there and who knows, maybe I'm just a bit too sensitive for it. But yeah, it can be quite attacking, you know, it's all about words and people don't really care about the feelings that they may be hurting on the other side. I think you need a bit of a thick skin if you're going to grow a big profile on Twitter. And for me, personally, Instagram just sits very, very well with where I'm at. And also, you know, who I'm trying to connect with. Because the thing is, we know it is all about time. There are so many different social media platforms out there and you could go to all of them. But for me, I prefer to do one well rather than try to do everything and not do it so well. And I think there is huge potential in TikTok, you know, I've seen some dietitians have amazing growth on there, but it's just, it takes time. You know, you need to be creating content regularly. It does work and it can help you to reach your audience. And, who knows, if I manage to find a little bit more time, that may be one that I would probably progress over others.



And then, we know that there's always ones that pop up. So we'll see like Threads, for example. And everybody was like, right, okay, we must get on it. And then from what I've seen, because I signed up to get an account and then I was engaging with it initially, you know, just to see if it went anywhere. And to be honest, I'm not really sure as a social media platform that it's gone to much of an influential place. So I've kind of left that, but I think one that's important to mention that probably gets less attention is LinkedIn, because LinkedIn is, you know, it's still a form of social media. And the tech firm I work for now, which is, you know, one of my biggest contracts. That came via LinkedIn. And so I'm actually really grateful for LinkedIn and I pay a lot more attention to it now than I used to do. So I would say the two main ones for me are Instagram and LinkedIn probably.

Sophie

Yeah. I mean, I'm really with you with that. And I think you're right. Twitter is so difficult and attacking and challenging and people want to really have a fight on Twitter. So unless you're really up for that and enjoy it, I can't see the benefit. Some of the worst trolling I've ever had has been on Twitter and nowhere else. I wonder how much that's to do with how Instagram is a bit more personable and, you know, people sort of feel they know you.

I think we can't underestimate the power of LinkedIn. I think when I'm lecturing on this stuff, when I go to universities, people might say, 'I don't want to go on Instagram. I don't my face all over the Internet blah blah'. Use LinkedIn, get those important contracts. That's where people are looking for consultant dietitians and stuff like that in reality. And I think you're right about TikTok. Actually I'm not sure that the people who have got the pockets for like private practice, for example, are on TikTok very often. Maybe that's more of an Instagram and speaking to the same kind of generation, I think, you know, I feel exactly the same as you.

Ro

With TikTok, I think it could be really good for just building your brand and kind of getting known and say like with fertility, for example, for me, you know a lot of people on TikTok are much younger so they're not yet thinking about fertility as much. But if you're kind of building that awareness, then by the time they are getting, you know, because they can then follow you on your platforms by the time it then becomes relevant for them. Then, you know, there's something in that. But yeah, you've just got to weigh these things up, you know, how much time have you got? Where do you feel is going to be the most impactful for you - considering what your goals are - and then make some decisions based upon that. I would say trying not to do things unless you've got a clear objective because otherwise social media can really take up a lot of your time and you've just got to ensure that the reward is there for what you put in.

Sophie

And so what about content? What's the best way to present your posts and personalise them to the channel? Is there a sort of technique, or tactic, that you've used that you think has been really beneficial?



Ro

In terms of say like my *@fertility.Dietitian.UK* page I tend to have a bit of a branding. So it's quite obvious for my followers; when a carousel comes up they don't even look at the name at the top, they can see it and then they know it's from me.

I find that previously, standalone posts used to work quite well, but I feel now that the posts that get much more engagement are the carousels, of information giving, and then also reels as well. We know that reels have been the making of some people's careers, like it's been that impactful. But the thing is, you know, it does take time. You do need to get yourself into a bit of a rhythm. And I have somebody that helps me with my social media as well. And we were actually talking about it just this morning about reels and getting some content ideas together. Because, ideally, if possible, it is good to have a bit of a content plan and then so you can just bulk prepare. We want to be doing a little bit more on reels going forward. But in terms of our carousels and how that's working, I think it works really well for us at the moment.

Sophie

So I'm conscious that there is going to be people listening who may have never used social media and they may not know what we mean when we say reels, carousels, things like that. Can just define those terms for us a little bit?

Ro

Historically on Instagram, you may have just one square image and it might have been an infographic, or something like that, or a picture of yourself or something. So now Instagram allows carousels, which is where you can have multiple images within one post and people swipe through, so you can have up to ten. So that could mean you can have ten pictures all in one post. Or you can have, say if you're going to be talking about a study or a topic, you can talk through it in different segments. So it's really useful and for me personally, I feel that carousels tend to do much better in terms of engagement than single grid posts.

And then in terms of reels, they are short videos and they used to be just up to 60 seconds. But now you can actually go longer than that. But it's just video content. It's video content that tends to be shared quite well. So it shows up quite visibly on people's feeds, but it just gives you the opportunity to record whatever you want to record, you can do voice overs, you can put trending music on it, you can add captions. So it's just kind of like quite a creative way in which to get your message out there.

Sophie

Obviously on social media, people can be really opinionated. Sometimes we get some really negative comments. I think we all get that, and people, you know, they're hiding behind a screen and it feels easy for them to speak in a way that they perhaps wouldn't or hopefully wouldn't speak to your face. How do you deal with negative comments on your post or, you know, trolling that you've experienced before?



Ro

I have really changed in how I deal with it. I mean, again, I'm not saying I'm like, you know, the Messiah at this. This not saying that I've got it completely nailed. But, I remember, you know, and this must be going back to... I don't know...maybe 2018, 2019, something like that. And then this one woman who is kind of actually I think known by some in the science community, came onto my post and just really, really attacked me and completely got the wrong end of the stick with the message that I was putting out there and was just really mean and really rude. And I was actually sad for about three days. I was like, Oh no! So I'm not used, you know, normally to people that were like mean to me. So I was like, Oh, that was really sad. But ultimately when you're out on social media and you put yourself out there, you have to expect it to some degree. And the thing is, with nutrition, it's one of these subjects that everybody has an opinion on. You know, even if yours is backed by the best science in the world, somebody is going to disagree with it. And the thing is, the bigger your platform gets, the more likelihood there is that people are going to find you and then share their alternative opinions with you and they can do it in a variety of different ways.

Now, if somebody did that now, I'd just be like - so what? And move on. And then also I'm not afraid to block people because I've got a small platform, you know, like 12-13,000 followers on both pages. It's very easy for me to manage my audience. I actually get trolled very, very little. But if somebody is rude or I feel crosses a line, it's my decision. So I'm not afraid to block people because sometimes that's just the easiest way to go forward. It actually happened recently. I put a post in fertility nutrition, and someone was like, 'Oh, I'm not sure about this bit'. And it was at the weekend I was like, 'You know what, I don't have to reply right now. I don't have to respond. I'm just going to carry on with my weekend'. And then by the time I looked back, somebody else in my audience had actually gone in and was carrying on kind of like my argument on my blog. I was like, 'Perfect!' So I didn't even have to respond in the end.

Sophie

It's really hard to teach resilience, but you get more resilient with time and exposure to people saying negative things about you. And, you know, sometimes they're really personal. And that's okay. Like, I don't care. It doesn't matter.

Ro

Exactly. And I think there is something quite nice, like when you do build this following and people have been, you know, people that you don't know have been following you for years. When certain situations arise, you can really feel that these people have your back and it's really nice. It's really nice. These people that you don't know and you know that, yeah, they're in your corner. So it is, you know, it is about building a community as well. And I really get those feelings from both of my pages actually. But in different ways.

Sophie

Yeah, definitely. And that becomes actually a really nice thing and also something that feels very supportive, doesn't it? Which is great.



Moving on slightly and I think you and I could probably talk about this for hours, but obviously on social media, many people are pretending to be experts in nutrition. And do you have like a personal tactic that you use if you see people sharing dangerous, or incorrect nutrition advice online?

Ro

It's really difficult, isn't it? Because, you know, there's a big group of us dietitians on there and I feel like people can deal with it differently. And some people will you know, be outraged and they'll do response videos. And to be honest, because, you know, the messaging within the response videos is right. And actually, these posts tend to get a lot of traction and it definitely corrects the message. I haven't done one of these response videos myself. I feel like my responses to these things tend to be a bit more passive, so I wouldn't necessarily, like to this point, nothing has angered me to the point of doing it yet, but who knows in the future. I'd love to flip it back to you and hear like your opinion on that as well.

Sophie

Yeah, I mean, it's difficult. I would say some of the most engagement I've had is on me saying this is nonsense, you shouldn't do this. And yeah, whatever that is, I guess I do a similar thing to you in that I won't ever be super direct about who I'm talking about, and sometimes I get criticised for that because people are like, 'Well, it's not helpful unless you tell us who you're talking about or what you're specifically referring to'. That said, there is an issue with when you tag someone who's saying nonsense in a video of yours, they are then getting more engagement. And there's always this kind of fine balance to trade between being candid about what you're saying and straightforward without supporting someone else's nonsense content, which is going to be seen by probably thousands, hundreds, millions of more people than is going to see your content.

I don't think there's a right way of doing it. I think you have to do what's right for you. And ultimately, you know, there are some big influencers now who've got big careers on doing response videos to stuff and they're doing a pretty good job. And I don't want the aggro (aggravation).

Ro

To be honest, I always evaluate all my social media posts before they go out anyway, even something in terms of the evidence base because it's like I've got to be careful that is this the right message, could it be damaging in any way? So I think we have a responsibility as a healthcare professional to actually just, you know, assess, review before it goes online. But I think when we're doing something that does have more risk, weigh it up. Think: what are the pros here? What are the cons? What are the potential risks? And then weigh up the risk and reward.

Sophie

We've seen some, more guidance popping up from some of our governing bodies. But do you know of any particular useful guidance that exists for dietitians and other healthcare professionals



about how to engage with social media, maybe even how to deal with some of this conflict that comes up?

Ro

Yes, the BDA. So British Dietetic Association, they have their guidance. And I think really there's going to be dietitians mainly who will be listening to this podcast. So I think for the dietitians, go and assess that. If you're unsure whether something that you're doing, or you're going to do, is in conflict just go and speak to the BDA because they're our trade union and they are actually there to help us. It's a good resource to go for. But, you know, other guidance in terms of, you know, anything that comes out through HCPC, I think, yeah, we just need to be aware of these things and just go and ask for further advice should you need it.

Sophie

The BDA and the HCPC have full PDFs, downloadable PDFs, use of social media, how to use it safely, what to do and what not to do. And the BDA is doing a campaign at the moment to try and get more dietitians on TikTok and they're sort of boosting followings on TikTok and stuff like that. So if people are interested in getting started, that would definitely be a good place to start.

So do you have some sort of key dos and don'ts for using social media? Is there anything that you particularly hold in your mind as being really important things to think about?

Ro

In terms of do's for people that aren't on social media like Instagram or whatever yet and want to do it: do it. That would be the thing because it's generally kind of like fear that holds people back. Like the fear and the 'what if' and then when people get on to it they're like, 'Oh, this is actually really, really good fun and really enjoyable and I'm actually meeting great people'. So I say, if you want to do it, you haven't started, definitely do it. And, if you'd asked me that question however many years ago, I'd be like, right post three times a week, do this, that and the other, schedule your posts blah blah. But actually I would think like do what's right for you.

Have a plan, go in with objectives. What are you trying to achieve? Are you trying to build an online profile? Are you trying to build a network? Are you trying to promote your services? And then create like, have a strategy in mind that is going to lead you to those objectives. So it's better to not necessarily, you know, just like go in blind. Go with a bit of a plan.

And I think also, think about ways in which to, you know, to protect yourself always like check in, in terms of burn out, check in, in terms of capacity, how does this feel for you? And, you know, if you want to take social media breaks or you want to just post once or twice this month like, that, that's fine. So yeah just check in with yourself.



Sophie

It's difficult because if you spoke to someone professional, they would be like - as in a professional social media...what would you call it, manager - you would say, you have to post this many times about this kind of content, this many days, have your content plan, all of those kinds of stuff. And I get that that's important, but actually that's exhausting and not taking it is not the job to me. And maybe it's important that we say when you're first starting out, that's probably something you do want to think a little bit more strategically about? Ultimately, once you've got it, maybe it is that 10,000 mark, you can be a bit more organic.

Ro

Again, it's going back to your objectives, if your objective is growth and I want to get to 1,000, I want to get to 2,000 then showing up, especially if your audience doesn't know you yet. So yeah, showing up, being consistent, having content pillars, thinking about who your audience is and what are their pain points, what are the questions that they want answering? What do they want help with? And really set it up in that way. So yeah, and in terms of the growth phase, then yeah, it could be really, really beneficial.

I would say in terms of the don'ts, I would say: don't get consumed with vanity metrics. Vanity metrics are likes, even followers as well, but actually is going back to your objectives. So it's like if you are building a social media account because you want to get people into your clinic, do the likes matter? No. Do the followers matter? Not really. If the conversion is very poor, people can have a very small page that is engaged and people who are going to be potential clients.

So I would say don't become obsessed with that and don't feel that you can't post you know, oh, I have to have, you know, like the highest quality, it must get this amount of likes, you know, just get your content out there. And I would say remove the ego. When we remove the ego from it and then stop thinking about, okay, I must get this many 'likes'. It actually becomes much easier and we're much better able to grow because that consistency and that posting that will open you up to more and more people.

Sophie

And I think one of the things with that vanity metric stuff we can get into is actually if you post selfies and bikini pictures and stuff like that, you are going to get more likes and probably more followers, but they're very unlikely to convert into useful monetizable clients for you or people that you actually want to engage with. They're more likely to be there for the wrong reasons. Let's say, and you might have a massive following, but actually that's not necessarily useful to you. So it's trying to do things in an authentic way to you and not get trapped into well, when I posted that bikini picture, it got X number of likes. Whereas when I post this thing about nutrition, nobody cares about it.

So, I think I heard something on the news the other day about TikTok potentially getting banned in the UK. And so I think that leads us on to quite a useful question anyway, which is: do you think



that the way we use social media will change in the future? And how do you think it's likely to look in five years?

Ro

I think it will always change and because, you know, even just thinking from when I came on social media in general. So yeah, there was the introduction of TikTok and some are more successful than others. Obviously TikTok has been hugely successful. Threads, not so much. And then also remember like Clubhouse? Yeah. So I remember because you did quite a bit on Clubhouse and that was really great for you, right?

Sophie

Yeah, it was during the pandemic. So we had loads of time we could just, you know, no one was doing anything in the evenings. So sitting on a clubhouse and having a chat and facilitating rooms was actually quite fun.

Ro

Exactly. And I saw also that, you know, for several people - and yourself included - that it could actually be a huge boost to people's accounts on other platforms. And now, you know, Clubhouse has kind of died a bit, but like fair play to the people who leveraged this opportunity to help them to then build their full platforms.

So I would say, it's always worth potentially jumping on a trend or a new platform at the beginning, test it out, you know, like we all did with Threads. Didn't go anywhere. That's fine. Did we waste that much time? No. But yeah, because it could be big. But then I think on the flip side as well is you shouldn't rely too much on a social media platform because ultimately, like, you don't really own it, you know, people can get hacked. So yes, please everybody, use your two-factor authentication, but equally, you know, Instagram may die as a platform. People may just choose not to go on there anymore. Our key audience may not be on there. So I think it's actually really important to build a business aside from social media. Highlighting here the importance of mailing lists that you own and your own website, looking into SEO, people finding you that way. So I think it's dangerous to solely rely on social media as your platform because, ultimately, it's owned by somebody else. And, you know, things could change. And as you said, I have actually heard that in terms of TikTok, but it's like if somebody solely had their career on TikTok and a platform goes, what's left?

Sophie

You can use social media super sensibly, even if you're not really ready to start out in freelancing yet. For example, you set up a social media and get it to send people to a blog that you host on your website mailing list, these kinds of things so that you can start to grow some SEO and presence for your website through social media so that when you are ready, you've got something there that is already performing from a visibility perspective, because otherwise, as you say, you're just growing a social media following to what end? That's not benefitting you and it could, and they do sometimes just disappear overnight. And that's something that we all need to be



conscious and aware of. Because you know, me and you've been doing well. I've certainly been building mine for a good ten years, maybe more. It's a lot of work to lose overnight as well.

Ro

Yeah, it is.

Sophie

You've got to make sure you're using it for useful things, otherwise it's not worth it. Also, two platforms we've not discussed. I've heard people can do incredible things on Pinterest with nutrition stuff. So for people who perhaps are less interested in putting themselves on social media and being quite so visual with it, Pinterest is a great place to share recipes, blog posts, blah, blah, blah, things that I don't know very much about it, but definitely worth considering. And also, YouTube is massive and very monetizable, so places where other people could be maybe doing a bit more exciting stuff, than I'm doing certainly. And I think there are other opportunities for sure.

Ro

And, also, we haven't really touched on Facebook that much though and obviously, people can host groups on there, it can be great for like building a community. You can have public facing pages and then you can have groups. So that may just work within your model. So just think about how you would like to run your community because Facebook can be really, really valuable for some people in some businesses.

Sophie

Yeah, definitely. I use Facebook a lot for my diverticular community, colostomy, ileostomy that kind of stuff which are some things that really fit nicely on Instagram in terms of age range but lots of whom are hanging out on Facebook much more. So maybe it's also about looking to see where your audience is most likely to be engaging and using those to leverage for advantage.

Ro

Indeed.

Sophie

Thank you Ro for sharing your social media expertise, really interesting and so lovely to speak to you!

Ro

I really enjoyed the conversation with you and I hope that it's useful for those that are listening.

Sophie

Thank you for listening to ProConnect, a podcast brought to you by Abbott. Join us again soon for our next episode where I will be talking to Sula Windgassen, a Health Psychologist, about managing burnout and wellbeing in the NHS.



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