

# NPI Numbers in Medical Media

## A Microlearning Module from the Association of Medical Media

### (VIDEO TRANSCRIPT)

In professional medical media, we often use NPI numbers to identify doctors for our marketing and publishing efforts. In this video, we will explore what NPI numbers are, and why it's so important to protect our data when it includes these numbers.

Every medical provider in the United States is assigned a unique 10-digit number, a system that was initially designed to identify them for insurance billing purposes. This National Provider Identifier, or NPI for short, is like a Social Security Number for healthcare providers.



Anyone can look up their doctor's NPI number on the public NPI Registry web site. You can search the database by name, and a ton of information comes up, including the person's NPI number, practice location, mailing address, phone and fax numbers, medical specialty, and the same data for their colleagues at the same practice.

At the same time, if all you have is an NPI number, you can just as easily access that same information on any medical provider.

Because NPI numbers are publicly available, those of us in medical media also use them to identify healthcare professionals for our own purposes.



Marketers use NPI numbers to identify the providers that they wish to target in their advertising efforts. They often send those along to publishers in what we call "matched lists." Medical societies and publishers also may append their subscriber and membership lists with NPI numbers for a variety of personalization and customer service purposes.

Depending on how we're using the NPI list, we can append it with all kinds of additional data about the provider's personal and professional activities, like attendance at scientific meetings, prescriptions written, journal subscriptions, engagement with pharma reps, and web site engagement data.

### **Now, here's where this can get sticky.**

This data may look to the untrained eye like a bunch of de-identified code on a

spreadsheet. **But as we just learned, this information isn't anonymous at all.**



NPI numbers have been used for identity theft and insurance fraud. And when the NPI lists we use are appended with additional details about the doctor that aren't typically available to the public, the risks are even greater.

Within our organizations, there may be a lot of different people who handle these NPI lists for different parts of their jobs, but they may not realize how sensitive they are.



Non-disclosure agreements are designed to protect this data from unauthorized use and sharing, but does everyone in our organizations understand the significance of these spreadsheets full of data? Are these lists being protected as well as they should be?

### **Now, let's talk about digital privacy.**

When we're targeting advertising to carefully curated lists of NPI numbers, we

naturally expect to receive performance metrics from the medical media outlets we are using.

But these days, it may not be enough to know *how many* people we reached. It's now possible to know exactly *who they were* on an individual basis based on their NPI number. We might also know what time they visited, what web page they were on, how long they stayed on that page, and even more explicit details about that visitor.

When publishers are willing to share this information with advertisers, known as **Physician Level Data**, or PLD for short, it's a goldmine for marketers in planning their follow-up strategies.

So yes, many publishers have a lot of information about the people using their digital outlets. There's nothing wrong with that. But when it comes to *sharing or selling* that information, it can get controversial - especially when it's not anonymous.



Other countries have passed laws prohibiting this kind of identity sharing without explicit permission, and some individual states have passed their own laws. Federal legislation has so far eluded our US lawmakers.

**Medical associations and society publishers are strict about protecting the privacy of their members.** That, combined with the kind of data security concerns we

talked about earlier, is why most association and society publishers will not share or sell this personal information, this Physician Level Data, with their advertisers, agencies, or anyone else.

They know their members would fiercely object, and many members would even see this as a betrayal. And remembering the Facebook Cambridge Analytica scandal from a few years back, medical societies simply can't take that reputational risk.



Still, for some of us on the marketing side, receiving this identity-level data from publishers has become an important part of our marketing strategies.

**So now we know. NPI numbers may look like anonymous data, but they are more like Social Security Numbers.** Each 10-digit number is easily tracked within seconds to a warm-blooded human being, and any activity associated with an NPI number is anything but private.



Hopefully, we now understand why it's so important that everyone in our organization protects this data carefully and uses it responsibly, and we understand why many organizations won't share this Physician Level Data at all.

We hope you'll share this information with anyone in your organization who touches any data containing NPI numbers.

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