



MARKETING YOUR PRACTICE



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The best way to build a medical practice is through word of mouth. The number one reason that people choose a physician is personal referrals from friends, relatives, co-workers and neighbors.

Word travels fast about positive experiences with physicians, but even faster about negative experiences so it is important to be sure each aspect of the patient visit is a pleasant. Happy patients make a successful practice and they will be an important part of your overall marketing program in addition to your own brand development and advertising efforts. Brand management, external marketing, internet marketing, public relations and community involvement are all part of a well rounded marketing plan for your practice.

Brand Management

Dollars spent on marketing aren't providing you with a return on your investment unless you expend equal effort on brand management every day. Brand management ensures that *everyone* who interacts with your practice has a consistent and positive experience. This is more about the little things you do than the big things you say and is the single most important differentiator between a good practice and a great practice. Brand management is not *part* of the practice, it *is* the practice. Patients want to be respected and treated courteously. They want to be made to feel valued and communicated to in a clear, concise manner.

There are many ways to run a practice that focus on brand management and keeping patients happy which often lead to more referrals. The first point of contact for the patient in a medical office is the reception staff. Ensure your phone and front desk teams are professional, courteous and welcoming. If a patient calls to make an appointment for the first time and hears an unfriendly voice on the other end, it may keep them from becoming a patient of your office. Your reception team creates the first impression of your practice since they are the first voices and faces the patients encounter.

Keeping to your schedule and staying on time is another important part of brand management. If you know there will be delays, communicate this with your patients so they know what to expect. It's much easier to handle a wait time if you have an estimate of the delay and a reason

for the delay up-front. Expanding your office hours can keep things running smoothly and avoid the rush of patients trying to get in at the very beginning or end of their own work day. This is also another convenience for patients which may lead to more referrals. Patients want communication not only about their appointment time but also about treatment, prescriptions and any testing that may be necessary. Taking the time to talk with patients eases their fears and shows you care about what's best for them.

Expanding Your Practice - External Marketing

Marketing is the process by which practices promote their services to potential patients. This can be done through various methods of advertising (such as print, radio, television, direct mail and internet marketing), public relations and community involvement. Marketing for physicians is different than other products and services. It also differs depending on the type of doctor. Marketing for primary care physicians is not the same as marketing for specialists. All physicians who plan on developing a marketing strategy should review guidelines from their state licensing board to ensure what is and what is not allowed in marketing of medical practices.

The first question you should ask yourself when marketing your practice is, "What makes my practice different from others in the area?" You want to talk about your education, training, special procedures, expanded office hours, special services and acceptance of insurances and how these set you apart from your competition. There are numerous ways you can communicate this to your potential patients, each with pros and cons. You should research your target market thoroughly before deciding on the advertising method that would work best.

1. Print advertising is less expensive compared to other media. Ads should be eye-catching and not too wordy. They can be distributed across a wide area depending on your ad contract. One disadvantage of print advertising is the decreased readership across all markets.
2. Radio advertising, which can be less expensive than television, has a broad circulation and low production costs. The downside to radio advertising is the audio limitation since there is no visual reinforcement and the exposure is limited and quick. Radio commercials have a strict time limit and it may be hard to get your message out in such a short amount of time.
3. Television advertising provides both a visual and audio message and allows for creativity. However, there are several negatives to television advertising. It is very costly and hard to determine the broadcast coverage. It can be a guessing game when trying to figure out which channel is best to advertise on. You might be providing the message to people far outside of your target market and not reaching your local market at all.

Internet Marketing

The Internet is also a great tool to market your practice. Good internet marketing requires knowledgeable people and starts with website development. Your website is your chance to show current and potential patients all you have to offer. You can get creative with the

information you choose to display and how you display it. Colors, logos, graphics, placement – the possibilities are endless. While this may seem like a goldmine for the creative designers of your team, creativity must be contained so the site stays simple, clean and easy for the visitor to navigate through. This is why it is a good idea to hire a professional web designer. The benefits of hiring a professional to design the site are worth the expense. Put together a team of creative employees who have the most knowledge of the practice to work with the professional designer.

When it comes to the design, visitors shouldn't have to "work" to navigate your website. Every section of your site should be clearly labeled. Good physician practice websites include information about providers and staff, forms for the practice (i.e. HIPAA and registration forms), links to medical information, online registration and a place to submit questions to the physicians. It is very important the site be kept up-to-date. Old information indicates a lack of interest in your practice. Be sure links are updated and include current hot topics. With an efficiently designed website that has all the necessary information about your practice and trending topics in health, people will look to you as the knowledge center and keep coming back for more!

In addition to advertising and internet marketing, every practice should also have a printed brochure. Included in the brochure should be physician biographies, the firm's financial policy, hours of operation and anything special about the practice. It should be colorful and eye-catching and convey a message without being excessively wordy.

Public Relations

Having a public relations strategy in place is another great way to market your practice externally. This will help you to be seen as an expert in your community in your field of practice. It can also reinforce your advertising campaign and help you become the go-to person for newspaper, radio, and television inquiries about medical topics. In addition to a public relations campaign, having a strong community presence is also important. Be active in your community organizations and focus on those specific to your practice (such as heart, lung or cancer associations). Become a community leader and use this involvement in your brochures, ads and website.

Marketing to Medical Colleagues

In addition to marketing to potential patients, marketing to medical colleagues will also help build your practice. Specialists continue to vie for referrals from primary care physicians. Referrals from primary care physicians to specialists are often based on relationships. Specialists, such as surgeons, get patients from other physicians rather than from the general public. There are different ways for specialists to market to primary care physicians so you can build that relationship and most of these are face-to-face rather than through media. Providing quick communication to primary care physicians about patients and ease of patient access will make the referral process smooth and seamless. Office managers can be instrumental in developing a relationship with those practices that are potential referrers. Providing large practices with a streamlined method for referring patients (special phone line or e-mail address) can make them feel that they are important and will result in additional referrals. Lunches,

dinners and educational experiences such as seminars and lunch-and-learns can also be great ways to market your practice to specialists.

Brand management, marketing, public relations and community involvement should be a continuous process. Marketing will help protect your market share and gain access to additional market share. It is important to consistently review your patient satisfaction and the number of referrals that you receive. This will allow you to see what's working and where you need to make adjustments. Marketing, if done correctly, is well worth the effort. If you aren't taking the time to market your practice, your competitors are marketing theirs and may be taking your market share. Start implementing these strategies today!

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