

# Tips for Marketing Your Practice

By **Margie Satinsky** – Special thanks to colleague Alice Saunders at Trisecta in Raleigh for her contributions to this article.

The options for marketing your practice are numerous. This article suggests tips for marketing effectively and traps to avoid.

## Start at the Beginning

Let's start with basics. Just what is marketing? Marketing consultant Peter Drucker calls marketing your "whole firm, taken from the customer's point of view." Taken one step further, marketing means "coordinated efforts to communicate with and persuade customers to purchase, use and repurchase the services that you provide through multiple points of influence." The American Medical Association describes marketing as the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives.

## Why Bother?

We count at least three good reasons why you should market your practice. First, medicine is competitive, like it or not. You're competing with others in your specialty, as well as with large health care systems. Second, decision-making about medical care involves patients and those who influence them (e.g., family, friends, other health care providers). All need to know what's special about you. Third, patients and influencers make decisions based not only on the perceived quality of medical care, but also on other factors, such as location, ease of parking, customer service, technology and reputation.

## Tips for Marketing Effectively

**Direct your efforts to all segments of your target market.** You have the opportunity to market to different groups, including existing patients and their influencers, potential new patients, medical colleagues in other practices and your entire workforce.

Existing patients comprise your captive audience. Ease of making appointments, clarity of instructions prior to a visit or procedure, provision of a clear treatment plan and caring follow-up all impact their perception of your practice.

Pay close attention to marketing in your waiting area, thinking less about keeping patients occupied than about educating them about the different services you offer. For example, specialty practices that offer a mix of covered services and elective procedures have a good opportunity to inform patients about the full range of offerings.

Potential new patients and medical colleagues will look carefully at your website; make sure your message to each group is clear and that you distinguish yourself from competitors. With respect to your own workforce, if your employees respect you and like the work atmosphere, they'll give you free positive publicity. If they're disgruntled, they'll share those feelings too.

**Make print and online information look professional.** A professional look doesn't need to be costly, but it does re-

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quire careful thought and time for feedback and revisions. Up-to-date, customized and easy-to-read information helps build patient trust and facilitates referrals.

**Track the ways in which patients find you.** Ask new patients how they heard about you – e.g., recommendation of another patient, suggestion from an employee, physician recommendation, website. Track the data by age, sex and zip code and reassess your marketing strategy every six months. Make your hard-earned dollars work for you.

**Regularly assess the experiences of both patients and medical colleagues.**

Patient perceptions of your scheduling system, office comfort, efficiency, feedback of results and interaction with employees may surprise you and your workforce. You won't know if you don't ask. Patient satisfaction surveys are great, particularly if they are integrated into your practice operations and don't feel burdensome.

We like the approach of Avance Care,

a primary care practice with multiple Triangle locations. It asks each patient to stop briefly at a kiosk on the way out of the practice and answer a short list of questions while the experience of the office visit is fresh. Ask medical colleagues as well as patients about their perceptions of dealing with you and your staff.

**Take a practical approach to social media.** Use social media only in ways that directly, safely and cost-effectively support your marketing objectives and communications needs. Just because a neighboring practice uses Twitter and Facebook doesn't make it right for you. Understand and manage the potential risks before you begin, particularly with respect to HIPAA privacy and security rule requirements.

Blogging can be useful for both marketing and patient communication. For example, a primary care physician might start a blog with brief tips for managing a chronic condition. The effort has the potential to better inform existing patients, attract new patients and help improve patient outcomes. Effective blogging takes time, effort, talent and clearly defined goals.

### Traps to Avoid

**Taking potshots with marketing strategy and budget.** Many practices allocate marketing dollars according to the medium (e.g., website, print, outreach) – what we call the potshot approach. A well-planned and carefully executed marketing strategy may deliver better results. Who do you want to reach and what message do you want to deliver? Can you track the effectiveness of what you are doing?

**Saving a buck by hiring a relative to do your website unless...** that individual is experienced in developing and maintaining professional websites using industry-standard development tools and is committed to providing the timely ongoing support that requires.

Broaden your goal from getting something up fast to creating a website with sound information architecture, or in layperson's terms, "good bones." Over time, you want to be able to deliver better functionality and expand content without redoing your initial efforts.

**Looking and sounding like everyone else in your specialty.** Forget about trying to be all things to all people and focus on your uniqueness. For example, mention special fellowship training, the frequency with which you perform a particular procedure, a new procedure in your community, the depth and warmth of patient interaction and ease of making an appointment. Ask patients and medical colleagues for written permission to use their comments as testimonials.

**Misunderstanding your Google ranking.** Google has made many changes

in recent years to curtail search engine spamming techniques that historically allowed vendors to manipulate rankings. Clicks on a high-ranking link in Google may not translate to a conversion to a patient who enters your practice door. Use a search engine marketing professional who has a good recent track record with other practices, and ask those practices how they know that their Google ranking is driving new patient acquisition.

**Re-inventing the wheel in the development of marketing materials and patient communications.** Take time at the beginning to create comprehensive and understandable content about the subjects that are important to you. Over time, refine, but don't necessarily rewrite all that you have. Retain your primary source documents, so you can easily go back for more as you enhance what you do.



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