



Marketing Your Practice

By Margie Satinsky, MBA, President, Satinsky Consulting, LLC

The marketing of your medical practice has a direct impact on your ability to satisfy and retain current patients and attract new ones. Every clinical and administrative aspect of what you do, including patient care, governance and management, financial management, human resources, quality improvement and practice operations, plays a role. Let's review the definition of marketing, some of the reasons why you should develop a marketing program, look at practical steps that you can take and, finally, mention legal and ethical considerations.

Marketing is your coordinated efforts to use multiple points of influence to communicate with and persuade customers (for example, patients and colleagues) to purchase, use and repurchase the services that you provide. You should market your practice for at least three reasons. First, like it or not, you are in a competitive situation. You are probably not the only show in town, and patients won't hesitate to find a new physician if they are not satisfied with the care you provide and their total experience with your practice. Second, although patients themselves make many decisions about which physicians to see, they also rely heavily on the influence of others. Primary care physicians influence their choice of specialists, and the opinions of family and friends count heavily. You want the people to whom patients turn for advice to know about you, like you and recommend you. Third, although you may believe that patients come to your practice because of your clinical excellence, they judge other features of your practice, such as the location, parking, customer service, technology and reputation.

As you develop a marketing program for your practice, emphasize the six attributes of an effective marketing program. First, develop a marketing program that is consistent with your business plan. Random strategies that are not related to a coherent plan may hurt you more than they help you. Second, keep your marketing plan simple and specific so that everyone in your practice can understand and support it. Third, actively seek buy-in from your entire

workforce, and help each person understand the importance of his or her role. Fourth, set attainable goals and make sure you can measure your efforts. For example, what good is a website if you can't track the number of patients who use it to obtain information and/or contact you? Finally, make your program timely. The months of January, February and March are the times when people resolve to watch their diets and increase their exercise. Reminders from you that emphasize health and well-being are more likely to be well-received now than they would have been in December.

Start by making the important distinction between internal marketing to your current patients and staff and external marketing to potential patients and to people in a position to refer patients to you. Then move ahead. Here are suggestions that have been effective in other practices.

- Your current patients are already familiar with your practice, and you want to make sure that they are satisfied with your clinical care and administrative processes. Retain their loyalty by regularly soliciting their feedback through patient satisfaction surveys. Give them clear information about your clinical and financial policies and procedures, both in writing and/or electronically. Make telephone communication with your practice a pleasure, not a hassle.
- Your workforce can be your strongest advocates or your worst enemy. Pay attention to workforce satisfaction. Good working conditions, clear processes for setting salary levels and fairly administered performance reviews keep people happy. When they are happy, they'll talk about you. When they are dissatisfied, they'll also talk about you and word of discord or unfairness will spread through the community faster than you can imagine.
- Develop strategies to attract potential new patients who have recently moved to the area, who are dissatisfied with their current physicians and/or who might

be coming to you for a second opinion. Forget the high price of advertising in the yellow pages and consider a strong interactive website. Although participation in the different managed care provider networks affects patient choice of physician, many patients who are ages 50 and younger use the Internet to find new providers.

- Tell your medical colleagues what you are doing in your practice. Personal visits to their offices, newsletters and Web bulletins are good ways to tell them about new physicians and new techniques in your practice. Now that hospitalists have become so prevalent, opportunities for primary care and specialist physicians to interact at the hospital setting are reduced. You must create opportunities to interact with your colleagues.
- Increase your visibility in your community by supporting health events that are sponsored by your local hospital and/or agency. Proudly wear a T-shirt that clearly displays your practice's name. Sponsor a team in a local race.
- Don't forget the government. The public schools and government agencies often purchase health services for their constituents. Make yourself known, and perhaps they will purchase those services from you.

Finally, as you develop your marketing program, be mindful of legal and ethical constraints. Your first priority is your patients, so don't compromise your integrity with a hard sell. Make sure to avoid conflicts of interest. Keep your messages truthful and fair; don't advertise what you can't provide and guarantee. Stark Law may apply, and finally, get written patient authorization if you want to use or disclose protected health information (PHI) for activities and communications that are considered to be "marketing" under HIPAA.

Margie Satinsky, MBA is president of Satinsky Consulting, LLC, A Durham, NC consulting firm that specializes in medical practice management. ■