

The Role of Practice Marketing

By **Margie Satinsky, M.B.A.**



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This article begins a two-part series on practice marketing. This month we cover the definition of marketing, reasons for marketing and tips for effective marketing. Special thanks to colleague Alice Saunders at Trisecta in Raleigh. In the next issue of The Triangle Physician we will identify marketing mistakes to avoid.

Just what is marketing?

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.

Some ask, “Why bother?”

We offer three reasons why marketing is important for your practice.

First, medicine is competitive. You’re competing with other independent practices in your specialty and large health care systems. Although insurance companies control plan provider networks, patients retain freedom of choice.

Second, decision making about medical care involves both patients and those who influence their decisions. All of these people need to know what’s special about you. Don’t assume that they know.

For example, concierge and direct-pay practices have unique setups. Why choose yours? Dermatology practices have different mixes of dermatologic and cosmetic procedures and Mohs micrographic surgery. What mix of services do you provide?

Third, patients and influencers make decisions based not only on the perceived quality of medical care, but also on non-medical factors.

Tips for Marketing Effectively

Define your target market broadly but specifically. Direct your marketing efforts to different groups. To follow are examples.

Existing patients care about ease of making appointments, staff attitude and helpfulness on the phone and in person, clarity of instructions prior to a visit or procedure, provision of a clear treatment plan, caring follow-up and a clear explanation of financial expectations.

Potential new patients and medical colleagues will look carefully at your website. Clarify your message to each group and distinguish your practice from that of competitors. Then, deliver those messages up front and succinctly, in a way that is friendly to mobile devices.

Supporting detail is an asset, but first impressions count more than ever. Here’s an example from a pain management practice.

Patients see the words “pain management” and may not understand their choices. Some practices focus on medication. Others offer interventional procedures. In some cases physicians always see the patients, but in other situations they don’t.

Your own workforce can spread a strong message – either positive or negative. Satisfied employees who know your expectations, feel respected for what they do and are fairly compensated will generate free positive publicity. Disgruntled employees share those feelings too. Your employee handbook should contain appropriate policy statements about use (or abuse) of social media with respect to your practice.

Strive for professionalism in print and online information. Professionalism doesn’t mean expensive. It implies careful thinking about content, appearance and functionality. Up-to-date, customized and easy-to-read information helps build patient trust and facilitates referrals.

Choose the right level of information for your audience. Although physicians thrive on detailed information, the general public increasingly expects information “sound bites” that can be supported with an additional layer of information, as needed.



The good news is that printing costs may decrease because additional layers of supporting information can be made available online, updated as needed and printed in attractive formats.

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 and/or website. Reach out and say thanks to the referral source.

Track referral data by age, sex, zip code and, if applicable, the specific type of service desired. Analyze that data when you reassess your marketing strategy every six months.

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 by using a patient satisfaction survey. One efficient technique is to ask 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.

Solicit input from medical colleagues too, asking 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. One of our clients, a successful concierge medicine physician, writes an extensive blog on a regular basis, demonstrating his knowledge of new techniques, seasonal issues and sensitivity to patient concerns. Patients sign up to receive the blog. Unlike a brief off-the-cuff Tweet, the blog helps maintain communication between physician and patient between office visits.

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