

Building Your Medical Practice Through Effective Marketing and Referral Development

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We've all heard the phrase, "if you build it, they will come," coined by Kevin Costner's character in the 1989 movie Field of Dreams.

If only it were that easy. However, the constantly changing healthcare landscape has resulted in new challenges every day, and marketing your practice plays a more important role than ever before.

So what is marketing? It is so much more than brochures, billboards, web pages, social media and advertising. While all of those things can play a role, the core of marketing your practice is about **relationships, service, community and communication**. And relationships include those with your staff, patients, referral sources and neighbors/community. Part of why these four marketing elements are so critical is the rise of the "**prosumer**" — patients who are proactive before they consume.

Today's "prosumers" turn to others — both in person and online — for opinions, feedback and recommendations before they make healthcare decisions, including choosing a physician. That is why patient service, communication and satisfaction have become so important. In addition, the patient voice has become amplified through online reviews and social media. As a result, you must differentiate on service and on relationships to succeed.

Deliver the 4 A's of Marketing and Service

Any basic marketing book or course will talk about the "four P's" — product, price, place and promotion. These are the building blocks of marketing. However, service has increasingly become part of the "product" physicians provide and patients expect. You can have stellar credentials and deliver the highest level medical care available, but if you (and just as important — your staff) can't keep your patients happy, many will simply leave and find another physician who will. The cornerstone to your survival and success centers on the "**four A's**":

1. **Access** — People want the highest level of care when they need it, where they need it. This encompasses things like offering extended hours, opening additional neighborhood offices, ensuring the right amount of time and quality of your interactions with each patient, involving patients in decisions about their care, and providing access to information they need online (i.e., appointments, test results, office visit summaries, descriptions of conditions and treatments provided, care instructions, answers to frequently asked questions, etc.)
2. **Availability** — This includes offering timely and convenient appointments to meet the needs of your specific patient base, being approachable and ensuring your team members are as well, promptly answering phone calls, and handling phone conversations in an unhurried and compassionate manner.

3. **Accountability** — The buck stops here. Patients want someone to take responsibility and provide them with accurate answers and explanations. They don't want to get passed along from one person to another, and they expect leadership, assistance and guidance in navigating what can be a complex healthcare maze. This means taking a streamlined and personalized approach to handling things like referrals, lab/test results, prescriptions and prescription refills, etc. Delivering accountability can be a huge differentiator for your practice, building loyalty and satisfaction among your patients and referral sources which leads to retention and additional referrals.
4. **Accommodation** — Prosumer patients want convenience and to feel that you and your team have genuine concern for their well-being. They don't want cookie-cutter care; they want customization. They want someone who listens and understands their individual challenges and makes it easy to get the personalized care they need. This involves an attitude of consideration and thoughtfulness amongst every member on your team as well as proactive communication when unexpected delays or issues arise within the office.

The easiest way to implement the 4A's in your practice is what business management guru Tom Peters calls "management by walking around." Walk through your practice and look at it through the eyes of your patients. Really examine the physical appearance and the human interaction/experience — the parking lot, the door, the reception area, the phone conversations, the restrooms, the exam rooms, the check-out desk. Does each convey the impression you want to make? These details make a difference.

What Referral Sources Want

The quickest way to organically grow your medical practice is through effective referral development which at its heart is about building relationships. This certainly includes building relationships with referring physicians, but it also means building relationships with your staff, patients and other professionals throughout your community.

Marketing expert Seth Godin has said:

"Every fast-growing social movement, non-profit and brand of the last decade has grown because people have chosen to talk. Not shelving allowances, coupons, A/B testing, Super Bowl ads, dancing tube men or Formula One sponsorships. Each can be a productive tool, but at the heart of real growth is a simple idea: People decide to tell other people. Start with that."

So what do referral sources want from you?

- To be kept informed
- To be able to reach you
- To get their referred patients in to see you in a timely manner
- To be educated
- To feel valued

And for referring physicians in particular, they want to feel as if they are a part of the care team.

One of the easiest and most effective ways to nurture these relationships is through two powerful and underused words — **“Thank You!”** This needs to be said frequently and in a personal manner. One of the best ways to do this is through a handwritten note card. However it can also be a text, a phone call, an invitation to join you for an event, or even a small, thoughtful, personalized gift at an unexpected time (not the winter holidays).

Do Your Homework and Know Your Market

Developing a comprehensive, strategic marketing plan can be an invaluable tool for your practice, even though it takes time and commitment. There are six steps to take before you even begin to develop specific strategies and tactics:

1. **Background/Situational Analysis** — Evaluate your current situation. Are there specific changes or challenges you face? Are there things on the horizon that will impact your practice (i.e., new competition, a new service/procedure, payer changes, etc.)?
2. **Goals/Objectives** — Develop three to five key objectives you want to accomplish and make sure they are measurable (and that you have the tools and processes in place to measure them).
3. **Target Audiences** — Who is your primary audience? Are there secondary audiences? Detail who these groups are and what they “look” like — where they live/work, age, health condition, speciality if they are a physician, etc. The more you understand about them, the better you can meet their needs.
4. **SWOT Analysis** — SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This is one of the most valuable exercises in developing your marketing plan. Involve your team in conducting the analysis and be completely truthful. Put a mirror on your practice.
5. **Competitive Analysis** — Identify your primary competitors and their messaging/positioning within the community. Look at their online reviews. What are their strengths and weaknesses?
6. **Key Messages** — Based on all of the items above, determine what you want your target audience to know. What makes you different? What makes you unique and valuable to them? How do you meet their needs and fill a gap? Talk in terms of specific *benefits* to them (what will they gain?) rather than *features* about you.

Where to Start? Five Core Marketing and Practice Development Strategies

Marketing a new practice is a process and takes time. While it can seem overwhelming, there are a few basic strategies that should provide you with a starting point:

1. **Handwritten note cards** — Never underestimate the power of this simple tool. It can be one of your quickest, most effective and inexpensive marketing tactics. In the technology-dominated world where it seems all communication is electronic, a personal note from you on a note card imprinted with your logo/name can make a powerful impact. It is not expected, and people will talk about it, strengthening relationships and generating positive word-of-mouth marketing for your practice. A few reasons to send a handwritten note card:
 - To thank a patient after a first visit
 - To thank a new referral source after an initial referral

- To a patient (after a visit) who has recently shared a significant life event or personal accomplishment with you (i.e., a promotion or new job, a marriage, birth of a grandchild, a graduation, running a marathon, a significant birthday or anniversary, death of a beloved family member, etc.)
 - To personally apologize for an unexpected delay or poor service experience brought to your attention. Assure that this is not the norm and state actions taken to prevent it from happening again.
 - To recognize a referral source for a professional achievement or significant life event (i.e., a birthday, a marriage, a birth of a child, a graduation, etc.)
 - To an ongoing referral source to thank them periodically for their trust and referrals
2. **Web site** — Your web site is a primary part of your professional identity and an extension of you and your practice. Think of it as another way to enhance the experience you provide to all of your customers — patients, family members and referral sources alike. Here are a few basic tenets to keep in mind:
- **Performance and functionality** — This means your site does what it should whenever it is accessed or needed. It loads quickly and correctly. All buttons, tabs and links work. Any online forms are error-free and easy to use, and the site performs well on search engines.
 - **Organization and navigation** — Those visiting your site want it to quickly meet their needs. Position the most important information on the top half of the page, including your phone number and address. Make it easy to navigate, find and read key information such as physician profiles, office locations, contact information, services provided, patient information and education resources, etc.
 - **Design** — You can be creative, but keep it simple and clean. Put the focus on clearly communicating the content.
 - **Content** — This is the most important element. Keep it clear, concise, current and useful. Put yourself in the shoes of a patient or caregiver. What information do they most need to know? What additional information will guide them on their health journey? How is your messaging differentiating you from your competitors?
 - **Mobile-friendly** — This is a must both for accessibility and search engine optimization (SEO)/site performance. Patients increasingly access sites on their phones and tablets, and Google uses “mobile-friendliness” as a key factor in its search engine rankings.
 - **Frequent updates** — A good web site is not a “one and done.” It needs to be maintained and frequently updated. One of the easiest ways to keep content fresh is to include a blog. This will also enhance your SEO.
3. **Neighborhood outreach** — Get to know your neighbors. This sparks opportunities and connections, and attracts new patients. It also positions you as a leader, fostering credibility and trust within your community. Go out and visit nearby physicians (even if they might not be a traditional referral source) as well as pharmacies, schools, dentists/orthodontists, optometrists, realtors, gyms/fitness studios, the police department, the fire department, banks, insurance agents, hair salons and other nearby companies. Introduce yourself and get to know them and their businesses as well. Bring along business cards and maybe even a treat to leave behind.

4. **Community involvement** — Become involved in a local organization. This can be something health-related, but it doesn't have to be. It can be a local school or some other cause you are passionate about. You can also consider joining the local chamber of commerce, Rotary, Kiwanis or another club to meet and network with business professionals in your community. But don't simply join; get involved. Offer to speak, help with a committee, participate in an event or serve as a resource.
5. **Touchpoints/unexpected actions** — Brainstorm with your staff to identify ways you can differentiate on service (both with patients and referral sources) and stand apart from other physician offices. This can include things like ensuring a knowledgeable, empowered person always answers the phone; providing patients with printed visit summaries, patient education and care instructions; and offering same-day, walk-in sick care for established patients, etc.

The secret to successful medical practice marketing is to understand what your patients and referral sources want and then find creative, personalized ways to deliver those things. Practices that can do this are on a strong path to success and sustainability. Remember, highly satisfied patients are always your best marketing tool.