

Medical Practice Marketing: A Must In Today's Times

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Today, physicians faced with diminishing insurance reimbursements and challenging economic times increasingly turn to marketing to build their practices. They know that **if they are not actively involved in marketing, their competition is**. To get ahead and stay ahead, they must become involved as well.

The marketing process begins with branding. Consumers are familiar with brands—Nike, Starbucks, Crest toothpaste, for example. Each company makes a promise to reproduce exactly the same experience with its product every time the buyer comes in contact with it. The Nike action swoosh delivers active wear in each of its products. Starbucks' coffee may not be the greatest coffee in the world, but Starbucks delivers an experience that is consistent and reproducible every time. Crest delivers its self-proclaimed “cavity-fighting toothpaste” in every single tube. In each case, consumers buy the experience they know they can count on. They buy the brand.

A physician's product is his practice. He must select as his brand the one or two things about it that set it apart from its competition. Then he must reproduce them with every contact his patients have with his office.

Surgeon X is a plastic surgeon. He may elect to brand his practice with the hi-tech equipment and techniques he uses to achieve superior results. Although he cares deeply about aesthetic values, has decades of experience, and always ensures a short recovery time for his patients, he has not chosen to brand himself with those attributes.

He has, instead, selected his hi-tech equipment and techniques as the distinguishing aspects of his practice for which he wants to become known. Other surgeons may use the same hi-tech equipment and techniques, but if Surgeon X establishes those as his brand, patients seeking such will turn to him.

Everything flows from this Surgeon X's brand concept. It shapes the total experience his patients have with his practice. The more he reproduces that experience, the bigger his brand grows. His logo expresses it. His letterhead and business cards reflect it. His website is an extension of it. His office culture reinforces it, and his operating room fulfills

its promise. Branding is the first step in a Marketing Plan.

Next come logo creation, letterhead and business card development, and website design. **“Websites” are almost a buzzword today.** Everyone is talking about them. Everyone seems to have one. Why?

Consider this scenario: Jane Doe, who is contemplating a face-lift, is seeking a good plastic surgeon. She can ask her friends for a recommendation. In which case, marketing begins with satisfied patients. She can consult her internist. In which case, marketing means establishing a strong relationship with referring doctors. Or **she can surf the web** (which she will probably do anyway if she has been referred to Surgeon X to make sure that she has made the right choice.)

More and more, the internet is the pathway into a physician’s practice. If Ms. Doe can’t find Surgeon X’s website, he doesn’t exist. And if that website isn’t professional looking, easy-to-navigate and informative, she will doubt the professionalism of his practice.

In any case, to maximize the likelihood of a prospective patient’s choosing him, Surgeon X must cover all of his bases. Besides a website that represents him and his brand well, he must have in place systems for building solid relationships with patients and with referring doctors.

The true heart of any Marketing Plan lies in its strategies. How will Surgeon X build the trust in his patients that increases the likelihood of their accepting his treatment recommendations? What can he do to retain his current patients? Increase their referral of friends and family? Build physician referrals? Attract the kinds of cases he enjoys? Build his revenues and profits? Help more patients? A good Plan sets in place systems to address these questions.

Once the strategies and the tactics to implement them have been established, print and/or electronic marketing materials to support them must be considered. **Most Marketing Campaigns today rely heavily on e-marketing.** This may take several different forms: monthly e-blasts just to stay in touch; informational fact sheets on pertinent procedures, techniques, or scientific findings; newsletters that include introductions of new staff, new locations, reviews of interesting cases, comments on issues in the local and national news relating to the physician’s field.

There is still, however, a need for more traditional marketing materials. Brochures or

fact sheets explaining each of the various services offered by a physician are important reception room reading. Frequently, patients are aware of only the service their doctor performs for them. When they or their friends or family require other services, they may go elsewhere not realizing that their own doctor could well provide them. Referring physicians, as well, may not understand the full range of the specialist's services. Brochures or fact sheets to educate them are also useful for them to distribute to their patients, as appropriate.

For new patient acquisition, **it is important to establish a target market.** Practice analysis reveals demographics—where patients live, how old and what sex they are, what their income level is, how much education they have had, etc. It is likely that new patients will come from that same demographic. For optimal results, print advertising and direct mail should be addressed specifically to that market.

Less conventional avenues of marketing include such things as offering educational seminars at community centers, schools or religious institutions, writing informative articles in local publications, volunteering services when needed.

Finally, when a physician has a unique case or a human-interest story to tell, a news release can be invaluable. It may be mailed to local papers or distributed on-line.

Producing bottom line results, medical marketing serves a risk reduction system. Handled well, it eliminates the haphazard development of a practice and sets it on a **course of systematic growth for the future.**

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