MARKETING THE PRIMARY CARE PRACTICE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

"Getting it" about Marketing

The notion of establishing a medical practice combines the worst elements of any small business. Not only must you deliver a very complicated service in a highly regulated environment, but additionally you have a business to run; personnel to manage, supplies to order, bills to pay and put out, and so on. As in any business success, the key metric to monitor is the balance between "revenues in" versus "costs out."

The revenue side of the equation is tied to patient recruitment and is your answer as to "how do you attract patients to your practice when there are numerous competitors they can choose." Strategically your question to answer is how can you become the "go to" service provider for a targeted group of potential customers.

The domain of "customer recruitment" in a business (or in medicine "patient recruitment") is marketing. Health care professionals are often uncomfortable with the concept of marketing. Envisioned are "slick" advertising campaigns, "gimmicky giveaways," or something perceived as just short of distasteful or unethical. In patient recruitment some more considerate ideas may make the most of your time and efforts.

So while marketing might mean advertising, it really means presenting the best face to all those who might come to, refer to, or just talk about your primary care practice. It also means consistently doing simple things like thanking physicians who refer patients to you, providing excellent care to your patients (along with little touches like remembering their birthdays), and letting the community know who you are and what services you offer.

How to Market a Medical Practice

There are numerous articles and materials that describe the methods for marketing a primary care practice. A key resource is the Medical Group Management Association (MGMA). MGMA is the premier organization for managing a medical practice and offers a range of resources specific to members' multiple practice management needs. There are numerous materials for free and/or for purchase on marketing and competitor comparisons. They can be found at http://www.mgma.com/. Membership will pay for itself several times over.

The following steps are some of the "basics" medical practitioners should consider when trying to market their practices.

Create a Marketing Plan

1. ***Assess who your target patients are.*** Make an outline description of what their medical needs most likely are. This will give you the foundation to understand your target market.
2. ***Determine how this audience receives its information in how to choose medical care.*** Seniors likely won't be found on social media platforms, while mothers of pediatric patients might use sites like Twitter and Facebook frequently. Consider print ads, networking events such as Health Fairs, press releases, social media and email marketing.
3. ***Develop a whole strategy for professional referrals***. Note the research says physicians refer in practice almost 30% of the time, but only refer out of practice to other physicians 5 per cent of the

time. How can you position your practice to not be seen as a competitor but as an asset to other practices? How can your skill set be known by other physicians?

4. ***Develop your marketing plan for the upcoming year***. Build a simple calendar. What will you do each month?

Determine Your Budget

1. ***Assign a dollar value to each marketing task***. Social media, for example, are free, but if you are not the one to implement them, you will have to pay a marketing professional to do so.

2. ***Look at your financial records to determine what amount you can afford to spend on marketing.*** Remember that spending on marketing will net more money for your practice, so avoid the "We don't have a marketing budget" mentality.

3. ***Adjust your marketing plan as necessary***. If you cannot afford to do all the marketing strategies you wanted to initially, plan to reevaluate after six months.

Get the "Indirects" Right

1. ***Be active in your local medical community organizations***. Attend local networking events with other professionals. This way, you can meet people you would refer others to, and they will return the favor. You may also find strategic partners at leadership groups and business meetings. Be active in hospital affairs---serve on committees, attend hospital supported events and parties, give your opinions on solutions to problems, and be humble while you do it all

2. ***Consider social media***. By providing your medical expertise on sites like Twitter and Facebook, you can establish trust with future patients. Target those in your geographic area.

3. ***Create a website---***with the templates and graphics available a website can be constructed and on the Internet in one day. Old patients use it to learn. New patients use it to find out who you are. Over 3 million people are surfing the Internet daily, so if you're there, you will get new patients.

4. ***Develop positive Press Relations***. Use press releases to garner local attention. Write a press release when you offer a new service or draw a connection between your practice and recently released studies that relate to what you do. Send the releases to local newspapers and magazines.

5. ***Stay in touch with your Patients***. Start a newsletter to them, or handouts you personally create on special medical topics. Use email to stay in touch with patients (and past patients). Send a newsletter with an informative article on your area of practice, as well as any practice news (new employees, new services or technology, upcoming participation in community events, etc.). Send something to them on their birthdays and holidays.

6. ***Be active in the community***. Participate in community events, such as health fairs or volunteer activities, to interact with people in your city. Getting to know you outside of your medical setting can help people feel more at ease with you and instill trust. Offer to speak at community functions, be part of a charity event, be out where people (potential patients) can see you —like coaching kids soccer games or going to church functions.

Patient Satisfaction: Goal One

First and foremost, treat your patients the way you would want to be treated. All complaints and concerns are legitimate. Patients and their families do not have your knowledge—of illness; medical resources; the vagaries of healthcare systems. You and your staff must be educators attuned to your customers' needs for information and realistic reassurance. Patient dissatisfaction may be invisible to the practice, but can have a devastating impact on the bottom line as follows:

1. Ninety percent of dissatisfied patients or customers will never tell you that they are unhappy, but they will not return and do business with you again.
2. Each dissatisfied customer will tell at least nine other people.
3. Thirteen percent of those who are dissatisfied will tell at least twenty other people.(4)

The dissatisfaction of only one patient with the quality of service during an office visit can result in negative marketing and lost revenue. If you pay close attention to the entrance-to-exit experience of an office visit, it can increase the perception of quality in the eyes of your patients. **Peter Beck has captured the challenge: "Your practice sinks or swims based on how well you meet and anticipate the demands of your customers."**

Advertising

A landmark 1982 United States Supreme Court decision revolutionized health care marketing, by permitting physicians to advertise across all media channels. Prior to the decision, physicians depended on patient, hospital and physician referrals as a means of expanding their primary care practice.

The National Yellow Pages Monitor reported in 1995 that a survey of 80,000 customers found that more than 75 percent of searches to "physicians/surgeons" in the Yellow Pages during the previous year resulted in a physician contact – and 54 percent of those contacts resulted in physicians providing billable services.
In a 2005 Yellow Pages Association study, titled "Physicians and Surgeons" ranked second in popularity of over 4,000 Yellow Pages heading classifications accessed by consumers. One of the most frequently searched specialists is the generalist or family practice physician. The office address, professional qualifications, practice services offered and physician specialties are the key features to be placed in the Yellow Pages advertisement.

Phone book advertisements can enable a physician to employ target marketing and market segmentation, which is the division of the market into different homogeneous groups. Targeting the mobile group of the population with visible telephone book advertising is one effective method to segment the market. Approximately 17 percent of the U.S. population moves to a new city each year and use the Yellow Pages and internet substantially.

Advertising the scope of the primary care practice is essential in expanding market share and improving revenue streams.

The Golden Rules for Primary Care Referral Management

1. Don't let them forget you're there. Add referral sources to your patient newsletter mailing list. Send cards on major holidays. Send notices when your practice changes or grows—or new services are added.

2. Meet every doctor who refers patients to you as well as every new doctor who starts or joins a practice. Take colleagues to lunch. Network at medical society meetings.

3. Build trust by demonstrating competence. Lecture in the hospitals of referring doctors or at large practices. Publish in major journals or Medical Society newsletters.

4. Make it easy and appealing for others to do business with you by being easy to work with.

5. Make certain that referring physicians receive copies of your notes, tests, and diagnoses.

Further Resources

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