

CHAPTER 7

Marketing and Promoting Your Practice

Keith Borglum, CHBC, CBB

Tao Le, MD, MHS, FAAAAI

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INTRODUCTION

Whether you're just out of fellowship and starting in practice or have been in practice for five, 10, or 20 years or more, you're likely continually looking for ways to market and promote your practice. There are many ways to build relationships with patients, potential

patients, your community and referring physicians. This chapter explores a variety of tactics you can use to increase your practice's visibility and position yourself as the "go-to" expert in treating allergic disease in your community.

Remember, **everyone** in your office is responsible for marketing your practice.

- Friendly, helpful staff goes a long way to ensuring your patients are happy and likely to refer their friends, colleagues and family to you.
- Communicating promptly with referring physicians increases the likelihood that they'll send more patients your way.
- Having a vibrant, up-to-date practice website enhances your online presence, can attract new patients and can increase the satisfaction of your current patients.

HAVE A PLAN

Formal marketing plans can be complex and take a lot of time to complete — time that you, as a busy physician, likely don't have. But as the saying goes, "If you don't know where you are going, you'll never get there."

- You should spend some time thinking about your practice today and where you want it to be one, two or even five years down the road.
- Then make a plan for how to get there by taking these (relatively) simple steps.

Set Objectives

Before you can get started, you need to set your objectives. Keep them as simple and as specific as possible; for example, "I want to attract a minimum

of three new patients per day.” Objectives work best with clearly defined target markets and should be:

- Challenging yet attainable
- Clear and unambiguous
- Written and measureable

Remain flexible to making changes as you go along and see what is working and not working.

Define Your Target Markets

In this step, you determine what type of patients you want to attract to your practice.

- If you have a strong subspecialty interest, include that interest in your plan.
- If you are fluent in a second language, investigate that need in the community
- A target market definition example might be “half general allergy patients and half pediatric food allergy patients, primarily from the east side of the city.”
- Include referring-physicians targets by name, specialty, location, insurance plans
- For each target market you identify, think about what their needs are and how your practice can meet those needs. Those will be the messages you use in your promotional and marketing efforts. Messages can differ by target.

Self and Competitive Assessment

You need to take a look at what allergy care options are available to the potential patients in your community and then determine what sets you apart from your competitors. Your clinical expertise is

generally assumed, absent contradiction, so look for other opportunities.

- Offer lunchtime, evening, or early appointments one or more days during the week?
- If others are closed Fridays or Saturdays, should you be open that day?
- Open access scheduling that allows you to see patients the same day they call?
- Are you conveniently located near a major employer in the community?
- Do you host a food allergy support group?
- Do you use the same EHR as referrers for ease of referral?
- If others don’t offer an EHR patient portal, should you?
- Do you accept insurance plans or ACOs that other local allergists don’t?

Then tell potential patients and referring physicians how you can meet their needs.

Budget

Marketing has an infinite appetite for money, so you need to carefully plan a budget. If you’ve got a large budget, you’ll likely be able to incorporate paid advertising, a better website, paid social media, and other higher-cost tactics into your plan. If your budget is more limited, you’re going to have to focus more on low-cost or no-cost promotional tactics. Your budget is going to help you determine your promotional strategies. Banks that offer startup financing (usually 100% financing is available) will fund almost any marketing budget you have; but don’t be wasteful! On the other hand, extra spending

in the first few months can catapult your practice to higher collections – and a higher income – faster.

A rough rule-of-thumb is:

- 10% of annualized targeted collections of month 12 during the first year to start a practice in a competitive environment. So if you want to be collecting \$50,000 per month in month 12 (the national median for allergists), consider a marketing budget of \$60,000 the first year, 30-50% of which will be spent in the first month.
- 3% of annualized targeted collections thereafter to maintain new patient flow

Obviously, if you are opening in an underserved market, you might need a very small marketing budget. Typically, your new patient wait list will equal others' within 6-12 months. Don't spend your budget to create excessive wait lists! Wait lists over 1-2 weeks might be ego-boosting, but you can do only one day's work at a time, so if your practice is full every day, you have a full practice (until you hire your new associate).

Strategies, Timelines and Responsibilities

Finally, you need to determine how you are going to reach your potential patients and referring physicians. You'll want to include a variety of tactics to cast the widest **appropriate** net possible.

The tactics you can employ are endless and you should choose methods that fit your budget, interests, and skills. For example:

- If you hate public speaking, don't try to use that in your marketing.

- If you don't like diagnosing and treating chronic urticaria, don't market that care as one of your specialties.

Remember that you don't have to do it all yourself. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, everyone in the practice is responsible for marketing and promotion, so engage

- your staff to do some,
- your website developer to do some,
- your CPA and attorney to make introductions,
- and your spouse or kids to do some,
- with you monitoring and directing "the choir".

To keep your marketing efforts on track, build a calendar and make sure everyone in the practice knows who is responsible for each activity.

Track Responses and Adjust the Plan Accordingly

Every new patient and every caller should be asked, "Whom may we thank for referring you to our practice?" or "How did you hear about us?" Every call and new patient source should be tracked. Make it a question on your patient registration form or site, and require staff to check that entry is completed on every new patient.

Different strategies have different response schedules, so your tracking should also.

- Newspaper ads last only a day
- Direct mail can lead to responses that trickle in for months
- Internet blog and social media postings may last forever, for good or bad.

Review summarized responses periodically, drop ineffective methods and re-invest in new ideas or the most successful strategies.

GET ONLINE

The digital marketplace is transforming how physicians interact with patients, prospective patients, other healthcare professionals and the media. Consider the following:

- Many of the top results for Internet searches for allergists are sites like Yelp, Angie’s List, ZocDoc, HealthGrades, Google+, etc.
- Mothers with kids under 18 – and their kids – are major users of social media. In a recent survey, 79% of moms were active in social media, 55% made a purchase listed on a blog, and 40% made a purchase based on a Facebook recommendation. (need to cite source)
- Another survey showed that 80% of nurses direct patients to health-related content online. Healthcare professionals know that patients can get needed information and support online.

They recommend healthcare sites they trust, and 34% of doctors go online with their patients in the exam room. (need to cite source)

- Do you accept emails from patients? More than 10,000,000 emails were sent to Kaiser Permanente doctors by patients last year.

Your Practice Website: Get Their Attention

Getting the average Internet user to spend time on your practice’s website can be similar to talking to a child with a short attention span. Here are some tips to catch and keep the interest of your web visitors:

- **The five-second rule.** If people don’t immediately see what they are looking for, they’ll move on. First impressions are critical. Five to 10 seconds is all you have.
- **First impressions are important.** The most important feature on your website is the “search” tool. Within those first five seconds on your site, research shows that 50% of visitors will use the search application.

HEALTH LITERACY — OTHERWISE KNOWN AS: “KISS” (KEEP IT SHORT AND SIMPLE)

Although millions use the Internet for healthcare information, a study published in *Respiratory Care* showed that these materials exceed average reading levels, thus limiting comprehension of the concepts presented. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that, on average, Americans read at a seventh-grade reading level, with many reading three grade levels lower. The challenge is to provide education and information on A/I that is engaging and easy to understand. Here are some basic tips to keep in mind when writing for your website:

- Write in a conversational style.
- Use words that are two syllables or less.
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
- Word counts of 300 to 400 per page are optimal.
- Offer options for more detailed information for those who want it; end each elementary page with links to more advanced information and resources.

- **Keep it simple.** The website design should be clean and professional with cohesive graphics and matching fonts.
- **Think billboard, not great literature.** An effective website home page is designed to be scanned, not read. Your content pages offer opportunities to build credibility and educate visitors about allergic disease.
- **Relationships start with a conversation.** Welcome to the world of social media. Your website visitors are expecting you to carry on a conversation. On your home and landing pages, strive for short sentences that are easy to comprehend. If visitors want detailed medical information, they will dig deeper within your site.
- **Relate to your visitors.** What questions do you hear from your patients and referring physicians? What is on the minds of your target markets? Your website copy should demonstrate that you can relate to their problems and needs.
- **Search for the right words.** Many people are familiar with meta tags and other tools designed to get your URL at the head of the Google list. These search engine optimization (SEO) tools can be useful as long as they don't compromise the quality of your content. A very profitable cottage industry has grown from SEO vendors — each company or service touting its scientific method for SEO. The most recent studies find that the top impact on Google in 2013 was your Google+ and Facebook pages and key phrased link-backs, followed by related, quality content.
- **Keep it current.** Web users return to – and refer their friends to – sites that offer new information on a regular basis. Ways for achieving this are by linking (RSS feeds) to news stories or other websites of interest to your visitors, tweeting bulletins and pushing pollen-counts and news flashes to mobile devices.
- **Make it local.** Google, Yahoo and Bing all favor websites that have enrolled in their “local” programs. Let local patients see you first. You probably don't care for patients in other states and countries.
- **Call to action.** What do you want visitors to do? Call your office to make an appointment? Sign up for a newsletter? Have a family physician make a referral to you? Let visitors know what the next steps are, and make the climb easy for them.
- **Put your QR code on everything.** Create it free on many websites. For a fee, you can embed your logo, too. QR codes put your practice info onto viewers' mobile devices.

Joining the Social Media Conversation

The landscape for the exchange of health information has changed with the explosion of social media. Google+, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and blogs have become popular destinations for millions of Internet users worldwide. Simply maintaining a website is often no longer sufficient for healthcare providers wanting volumes of new patients in competitive urban markets, as Internet users are drawn to content they can engage with and share with others. (However, the Yellow Pages still generally outperforms paid online ads in rural North America.)

SOCIAL MEDIA 101

A QUICK GUIDE TO POPULAR SOCIAL MEDIA OUTLETS AND TERMS

Facebook: Originally a social networking tool for college students, Facebook allows people to connect and communicate with friends, family and co-workers. In addition to creating personal profiles, organizations can create pages or groups.

Google+: Google’s “Facebook”, featuring groups you can join and users you can follow.

Twitter: A social networking and microblogging site where users send and read messages known as “tweets.” Tweets are limited to 140 characters.

YouTube: A website for sharing and viewing videos.

Blog: A type of website where an author writes regular entries featuring commentary, graphics or video.

Podcast: A series of digital audio or video files.

RSS feed (really simple syndication): A family of web feed formats used to publish frequently updated works — such as blog entries, news headlines, audio and video — in a standardized format.

Application, or “App”: Software designed to perform a specific task or function that people download and install onto their smartphones or other compatible devices.

- **Think goals, strategies and objectives.** Before you get started online, you need a specific plan. Plot out what you hope to accomplish by using social media and make your objectives measurable. Blindly jumping in will leave you unfocused and without any direction. Who in your office will work on social media and your online presence? It can take all your time if you let it, and if you don’t keep it up, it gets stale.
- **Decide which outlets make the most sense for you.** Familiarize yourself with each social media site and see how it would fit your goals, strategies and objectives. Select one or two sites that are in line with your social media plan. It’s better to concentrate on a few than to try your hand at all of them. You don’t want to spread yourself too thin or bombard your audience with too much messaging. A weekly post may be enough.
- **Know the limitations of each outlet.** Each social media site operates differently and you should be familiar with how the site works. For example, on Twitter, messages called “tweets” are only 140 characters long. You don’t have a lot of space to get your message across, so use it wisely. If you plan on directing your patients to content on your website for more information, you can use sites like TinyURL.com to reduce characters.
- **State your intentions clearly.** Let your audience know why you’re using that particular social media site, and what interactions are – and are not – appropriate. If you set up a Twitter account but are concerned that patients may try to ask medical questions, write in your bio and/or Tweet reminders that patients who have specific questions should call your office to set up an appointment.

- **Update often.** If you create a fan page or group on Facebook for your practice, you need to make posts or add new content on a regular basis. At a minimum, you should be posting at least once or twice a week. If patients visit you on Facebook or Twitter and see that nothing has changed in several weeks, months, or years, they'll stop coming. Consider automating some content via RSS feeds (search for "allergist RSS feeds"). But beware ads that might follow. Or post to other popular blogs instead with linkbacks.
- **Respect patient privacy.** This may be common sense, but it's important to keep HIPAA in mind as you interact online. If you're concerned about patients posting sensitive information, put up a disclaimer about doing so. The AMA considers it an ethical violation to "friend" patients.
- **Don't forget about physician networking sites.** Popular ones include LinkedIn, Sermo, Doximity, Medpedia and Ozmosis. Interacting with other physicians can pay off for your practice in the form of referrals. Although these sites (except LinkedIn) are closed to the public and for physicians only, you should still keep HIPAA concerns in mind.

GET OUT OF THE OFFICE

An old referral-building truism is "See the people, belly to belly" ("STPB2B"). Another phrase is "It's not what you know, it's who you know." Getting involved in your community (STPB2B) can really increase your visibility with current and prospective patients and referring physicians. The easiest way to start is to get involved with something that interests you,

your spouse or your children. Perhaps your practice can sponsor your daughter's soccer team. Or you can give a talk on spring allergies at your spouse's biking club meeting. Many organizations like Rotary, Lions, county nursing associations and other groups need monthly speakers. Consider your interests and hobbies and get out of your office to STPB2B!

Build Relationships with Referring Physicians

You only get to be "the new person" once, so do all those face-to-face things first, like meeting potential referrers.

- Call potential referring offices' receptionists, or have your receptionist do it, and set a 10-minute appointment to introduce yourself to the physician(s). Few have time for lunch anymore. The receptionist will know how and when their boss wants to do it.
- If the receptionist says "Bring lunch for five" – do it.
- Set at least five appointments a week, as one to two are likely to reschedule. You'll still net over 150 introductions in the first year.
- If you've hired experienced staff, they may have many good contacts with other offices. Unlike physicians, almost all staff have to take lunch breaks. Consider funding a lunch program between your staff and theirs. Often referrers will tell their medical assistant "Get this patient an appointment with one of our allergists". Become one, and the MA becomes the referrer.

Ideally, you build a practice that relies on patient and physician referrals for new patients. Here are a few

ways to connect with new referring physicians and strengthen the relationships you already have:

- Survey the primary care referrers in your area to find out what they want and how you can help them. Under ACO plans, reducing their need to refer, or helping reduce their patients' asthma ER visits, may help them get bonuses, and get you their remaining referrals. It's likely that the best aid you can provide is telling them they can "send the urgent patient right over".
- Communicate promptly with the referring physician after you've seen his/her patient.
- Send an oversized postcard to regional primary care offices introducing your practice and what services you offer. Consider your "region" within labor pool commute distances (often up to two hours radius in rural areas).
- Speak — at the medical center, during grand rounds, or with your nurse educator at local primary care offices.
- Be active in local medical societies — join a committee, and give talks at the meetings.
- Participate in hospital staff meetings and committees.
- List your practice with the hospital referral program.
- Invite residents (internal medicine, pediatrics, family medicine and so on) to rotate through your practice.
- Take a role in the local medical school — identify the gatekeepers, talk with them, offer to give lectures.
- If you're starting a new practice, hold an open house for referring physicians and their staff

60 days after opening (to give yourself time to settle in), but not around a holiday.

- Meet appropriate non-physician referrers like pharmacists, chiropractors, optometrists, dentists, massage therapists, herbalists and naturopaths. They all have patients, family and friends with allergies.
- DO NOT gift referrers or potential referrers or their families with ANYTHING over \$25 in value. (Please refer to the Stark law, the Sunshine Act and the anti-kickback laws).
- DO NOT offer free care or waiver of copays and deductibles to them either for the same reason.

Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) are becoming a significant force in some markets, reintroducing managed care and "gatekeepers" into the marketplace. These are typically formed by hospitals, HMOs, IPAs, insurance companies, foundations and similar large organizations. Primary care physicians can only affiliate with one ACO but specialists can affiliate with many. Ask around to see if any are formed or forming in your area and initiate a dialogue.

Connect with Your Community

Become a key resource for information on allergic disease in your community. Here are some ideas for connecting with schools and businesses:

- Set up support groups for patients with food allergies or asthma and hold meetings at your office.
- Participate in local service, business and educational organizations — Rotary, Kiwanis, Chamber of Commerce, PTA.

- Participate in community health fairs and make sure you take educational materials that have your practice information on them.
- Run for the local school board.
- Speak — to school nurses, at the PTA meeting, during a Chamber of Commerce event, to scouting organizations.
- Develop a relationship with the corporate sector, particularly the HR/benefits departments of large and mid-sized companies in your area. Maybe offer shots-outreach clinics in their facilities.
- Develop a quarterly or seasonal patient newsletter and provide extra copies in your waiting room for patients to pass along to friends and family.

WORK WITH THE MEDIA

Reporters

Despite the immense popularity of social media, traditional media (print, TV and radio) are still relevant. If you develop trusting relationships with media contacts in your community, they're more likely to keep you top of mind when they're looking for story ideas or expert quotes on topics related to allergic disease.

Develop a local contact list. Local television, radio and newspapers have designated reporters, editors and producers covering health, outdoors or other related issues. Document the name of the contact, their title and their beat (if applicable). Many reporters prefer to receive communications via phone or e-mail, so include this information in your list too. You also might want to note whether

the reporter has a Twitter account. Update your list as often as you can, because staff changes happen frequently. Many newspapers now also have blogs on their websites. Check to see whether there is one specific to health topics, and contribute, with backlinks to your website “for more info”.

Know your audience. It's important to know who your audience is, so take the time to familiarize yourself with some of the reporters' stories. It will give you a sense of what topics they generally cover. It also might give you an idea of something to pitch to them.

Make initial contact. Send a personalized e-mail or make a phone call to introduce yourself. Offer to serve as a source for expert commentary and give examples of topics on which you could be interviewed. Ask how the reporter would prefer to receive story ideas (phone, e-mail) and provide your contact information. There is a standard format for press releases, so learn it and follow it.

Consider availability (theirs and yours). Media outlets receive hundreds of e-mails and releases each day. Make your communications stand out by considering what types of story suggestions each outlet is looking for, when they want this information and how they want it. Reporters, particularly if they are responding to current events, often develop their stories on a daily deadline. Once you start to promote yourself as a local resource on allergic diseases and patient care, you'll need to make yourself available on very short notice. Consider submitting to PR sites like PRNewswire.com. Reporters have accounts set up to receive anything of interest, like anything with the name of their city or county in it.

WORKING WITH PRINT, TV OR RADIO: WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES?

	Print	TV	Radio
<i>Length of story</i>	Determined by word count or column inches	Typically from 15 to 90 seconds	Usually 30 to 60 seconds
<i>Audience</i>	Can re-read if something isn't clear	Has one opportunity during the news broadcast to see the story	Can hear it more than once during the day
<i>Interviews</i>	More often done over the phone or by e-mail; also can be done in person	Usually done in person; sometimes a sound bite is used from a recorded interview	Done in person or over the phone
<i>Graphics</i>	Words, photos, "infographs" used to tell the story	Action and live interviews used to explain the story	Words and sounds used to explain the story
<i>Deadlines</i>	Typically daily or weekly, and sometimes monthly depending on production schedule	Usually day of event	Usually day of event

Keep regular contact. Be proactive in suggesting story ideas. For example, when ozone alerts are issued, suggest a story on what precautions asthma sufferers should take. Don't offer unsolicited pitches too frequently, though, or you risk becoming a bother. Strike a balance in how often you contact a reporter and make a pitch. Monthly and seasonally is fine. Also, any time there is a national story, contact the media with a local angle.

Lights, Camera, Action! How to Face On-Camera Interviews Head-On

Television is a visual medium, so interview appearances are especially common during spring and summer allergy seasons. Create successful interviews by following these tips:

- **Prepare.** Ask questions to determine what the focus of the interview/story is going to be. Find out how much the reporter already knows and what information he/she would like you to provide. Most reporters won't give you the exact questions in advance because they don't want

you to read from a script, but they will give you concepts to work from.

- **Develop three key points.** Be prepared with a three-point message that considers what you want the audience to know, how you want them to feel and what you want them to do. Think of different and interesting ways to phrase each of your points. Think sound bites. Responses shouldn't be more than three or four sentences.
- **Look your best.** Your wardrobe and physical appearance are important. Wear subdued clothes, as bright colors and big patterns are difficult for the camera, as are black and white.
- **Make and hold eye contact with the person asking the questions, not the camera.** Project a lot of enthusiasm and try to look as natural as possible. Waving your hands, tapping your foot or touching your face is distracting. Keep your hands in your lap or folded on a table.
- **This one is worth repeating: You will have literally seconds or a minute to make your key point.** Decide what that will be ahead of time

and use it often. Think “sound bites”. They may record you for 15 minutes, and use 30 seconds.

- **Join the AAAAI media link.** When reporters call the AAAAI looking for expert sources for articles about allergic disease, they are connected with MediaLink members who have expressed an expertise and desire to be interviewed on the topic. Contact Megan Brown at the AAAAI if you are interested in being included in the AAAAI database of physicians willing to speak with the media.

Advertising

Keep in mind that although advertising and public relations/promotion may go hand-in-hand, they are not the same. With advertising, you control the message, where it’s placed and when it will appear. You also pay for it. Advertising can include:

- Newspaper, magazine, radio and television ads
- Direct mail postcards or letters
- Educational brochures customized with your practice information
- Yellow Pages listing
- Google AdWords and other online ads
- Billboards, bus or shopping cart banners, and other similar advertising

Here are four important things to consider when developing any advertising for your practice:

- Be in it for the long haul. Studies prove that it takes seven “hits” for name recognition. Want your message to be remembered? People have to see it an average of 21 times. Don’t buy into

advertising sales reps who tell you they have a special promotion for one-shot advertising placement.

- Choose the media and time of day that will reach your target market.
- The purpose of advertising is to generate interest, not to offer in-depth information. Keep the copy short and simple.
- Motivate prospective patients to contact you, even if initially it isn’t to make an appointment. One idea is to offer to send them free information, such as one of the public education materials available from AAAAI. Personalize it with a note with details about your practice.

For example, a one-inch ad that says, “Allergies? Call 123-4567 or go to CityAllergy.com to see Ima Allergist, MD” run 20 times will usually outperform a 20 inch ad run once. (Always remember that your personal name must be in all ads by the laws of most states – ask your attorney).

The AAAAI offers several cost-effective ways to promote your practice:

- Brochures and that you can personalize, available to members at discounted rates
- An enhanced AAAAI Find an Allergist/Immunologist directory listing
- News release templates on seasonal topics to customize to your practice and community

RESOURCES

(All websites accessed January 7, 2014)

Online

- AAAAI — Marketing and Promoting Your Practice page. Retrieved from www.aaaai.org.
- AAAAI public education library and online store — offering free and discounted public education materials.
- Medical marketing articles by Keith Borglum. Retrieved from www.PracticeMgmt.com/articles.html.

Books

These are available at Amazon.com, among other booksellers.

- Bashe, *Branding Health Services*.
- Berkowitz, *Essentials of Healthcare Marketing*.
- Borglum & Cate, *Medical Practice Forms Book*.
- Fortenberry, *Marketing Tools for Healthcare Executives*.
- Baum, *Marketing your Clinical Practice, Third Ed.*

Software

- Marketing Plan Pro®. Available at www.paloalto.com/marketing_plan_software.
- Office Ready Marketing Plans. Available at <http://templatezone.com>.
- Plan Write® for Marketing. Available at http://brs-inc.com/marketing_plan.asp.