

CHAPTER 7

How to Market Your Practice

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Why Market Your Practice?
2. Types of Marketing
3. Have a Plan
4. Common Start-Up Marketing Strategies
5. Marketing Resources

WHY MARKET YOUR PRACTICE?

It doesn't matter how good a physician you are if you are not providing care to patients. Patients need a way to find you, either by referral by others or self-referral. Marketing is merely the name for methods used to attract and retain patients. Everyone can find types of marketing that suit them, no matter their skills, experience, or philosophy.

TYPES OF MARKETING

Internal Marketing

Internal marketing is any technique used to retain patients or stimulate referrals from existing patients. Techniques include pleasant staff telephone etiquette, seeing patients on time, hanging signs in waiting rooms encouraging referrals, asking patients to send their family and friends in response to patient compliments, and providing handouts with your name on them.

External Marketing

External marketing is any technique that attracts patients other than by referral from existing patients. This category is what people typically think of when they think of marketing.

Techniques include advertising, websites, referring physicians, social media, and direct mail.

HAVE A PLAN

The saying “If you don’t know where you are going, you’ll never get there” holds true for marketing. Business owners should never spend a nickel on marketing unless they know how it meshes with their overall marketing plan. The steps for developing a plan are as follows (each step is described in detail below):

- Set objectives
- Define your targets
- Define the desires of the target patients
- Self-assessment
- Assess the competition
- Assess the market
- Determine a budget
- Determine strategies
- Evaluate cost-effectiveness of strategies
- Create a calendar

Set Objectives

Objectives need to be (1) challenging, yet attainable, (2) clear and unambiguous, and (3) written and measurable. Objectives can be quite simple, such as “I want to attract a minimum of five new patients per day.” Objectives are best with defined targets and these can always be reset later.

Define Your Targets

In this step, you determine what type of patients you want to attract to your practice. Since “like refers like,” this decision can have a long-term effect on your patient mix. For example, if you have a strong interest in a subspecialty area such as pediatrics, asthma, or food allergies, include that in your plan. A target definition might be: “Half general allergy patients and half pediatric food allergy patients, primarily from the east side of town.”

Define the Desires of the Target Patients

A successful marketing plan requires knowing the desires of the target audience. The next step, therefore, is listing what the target patients want, preferably in their own words.

Self-Assessment

Identify your **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats** (i.e., “SWOT”), as they pertain to your targeted patients and their desires. For example: “My strengths are my advanced clinical expertise based on fellowship training and participation in ongoing clinical trials in my associate professorship at the university, and my open-access schedule, which enables me to see patients quickly. My weaknesses are my shyness when meeting new people, especially in groups, and having no referral base. My opportunities are that the existing allergists all have waiting lists of at least a month and I will be able to see patients more quickly. A threat is if the university opens its own satellite office here.”

Assess the Competition

Make a list of the SWOT of your competition. Include days and hours of availability, wait time for appointments, physician age and training, insurance plans accepted, marketing aggressiveness, clinical reputation, and personality. Plot their offices on a map. List their primary referrers if possible.

Assess the Market

List community demographics (the local chamber of commerce website is often a good source of this information), primary care physician (PCP) referrer demographics, insurance plans, and boundaries such as highways, rivers, and city boundaries.

Also determine your key decision-maker demographics, like females with families, employment status, location of residence, or employment location. Female heads of households are the best general demographic because they often influence or decide for themselves, husbands, children, and sometimes parents, and often discuss their decisions with other female heads of households. Residential targeting is best in urban and rural locations, but for larger urban locations place of work might be more important.

Determine a Budget

Monthly marketing budgets are usually in the range of 3–5% of targeted monthly collections. Add 50% of the annual marketing budget to the first month of the first year of practice for “new doctor” announcements and ads.

Determine Strategies

Based on the above research, what are the best ways to reach your target patients? (See the sample strategies at the end of this chapter for ideas.)

Ideally you build a practice that relies on patient and physician referrals for ongoing marketing. Despite that, you will want to continue at least a baseline of ongoing marketing for the life of the practice, like phone-book and internet listings, association directory listings, seasonal mailings, and meeting new potential referrers. Different techniques work in different markets, so track the results of your start-up marketing in your market, and consider continuing those and dropping those that are less effective.

Evaluate Cost-Effectiveness of Strategies

Almost no one ever has enough money in their budget to implement all possible marketing strategies. Get bids for different strategies. For example, a direct-mail postcard in batches of 2500 or more costs approximately 50 cents each, and letters in envelopes cost approximately 75 cents each. Try to estimate the cost per new patient and prioritize your spending to maximize your return on investment.

Create a Calendar

Create a calendar to spread marketing activities throughout the month and year, keeping seasonality in mind, as the best time to market is in your high season (typically spring and late summer), not your slow season. For example, send 1000 postcards per week, not 5000 in 1 day.

Implement Strategies

Delegate as many marketing tasks as possible to staff or outside services, such as mailing houses and webmasters. Make sure staff are aware of the practice's marketing activities so they can properly respond to inquiries and phone calls.

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. Different strategies have different response schedules. Newspaper ads last only a day. Direct mail can lead to responses that trickle in for months. Review responses periodically, drop ineffective methods, and reinvest in new ideas or the most successful strategies. Market responses differ for many reasons, sometimes for reasons you will never know.

COMMON START-UP MARKETING STRATEGIES

- Get a phone number and add it to the Yellow Pages listings. This should be done as soon as possible, because missing the submission deadline by one day can delay a listing by up to 18 months due to the pre-registration requirements.
- Acquire an Internet domain name, host, and web designer. Begin using the associated e-mail address to communicate with vendors.
- Build a website in time for the first opening announcements and phone book listing.
- Consider search engine optimization of your website so patients can find you online. List your website with all your member associations, search engines (including their local initiatives), Yelp, and City Search. By far the most important things to remember here are to read each directory's registration instructions and follow them exactly, and to read some third-party research first, such as that found at webmasterworld.com.
- Create an attractive practice brochure with content similar to the website.
- Enroll in the top 10 insurance plans. Ask PCPs for recommendations.
- Order address labels for direct mailings and hire a local mailing service.
- Send a letter or postcard announcement to all physicians licensed in the market (buy the mailing list).
- Direct-mail a postcard with a "new doctor" announcement and a list of services to all priority-targeted potential patients in your primary service area. (For example, to all mothers aged 25–40 with household incomes over \$50,000 within 10 miles of the office.)
- Send a press release to local (and ethnic, if appropriate) newspapers with a photograph.
- Send press releases to local newspapers every 90 days with special topics.
- Place an announcement advertisement with a photo in the newspaper for 30 days.
- Meet all potential MD referrers at the rate of at least three to five per week.
- Meet appropriate non-MD potential referrers (e.g., DCs, ODs, herbalists, and naturopaths).
- Meet local pharmaceutical reps: they know everyone.
- List your practice with the hospital referral program.
- Take unscheduled meals (breakfast and lunch) at the hospital, if it's nearby, for the first

90 days.

- Meet with staff to educate them regarding services and procedures.
- Hang a framed photo with a mini-biography and welcome message in the waiting room.
- Design the office sign for the door, directories, or curbside.
- Hold an open house for referrers and their staff 60 days after opening.
- Join the speakers' bureau if you like speaking.
- Join the chamber of commerce and host a social/open house.
- Offer continuing education classes for targeted licensees such as chiropractors, cosmetologists, and massage therapists.
- Look up your personal listing on the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology's "Find an Allergist/Immunologist" page (www.aaaai.org) and consider upgrading your directory listing.
- List yourself at the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology's Find an Allergist, and Find Relief initiative at www.acaai.org and www.allergyandasthmarelief.org, plus any other associations in which you participate, such as local and state medical association member websites.
- Offer to present grand rounds. Potential topics include:
 - Allergic emergencies in schools
 - Allergy testing
 - Anaphylaxis
 - Asthma
 - Atopic dermatitis
 - Auto-injectable epinephrine
 - Drug toxicity
 - Exercise-induced asthma
 - Food allergies
 - Genetics of allergy
 - Immune deficiency
 - Indoor air quality
 - Pediatric asthma
 - Quality of life

- Rhinitis
- Taking control of asthma therapy
- Urticaria

MARKETING RESOURCES

Online (All websites accessed February 15, 2010)

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology, Promoting Your Practice page

http://www.aaaai.org/members/only/media_link/

Creative Marketing Ideas

<http://www.memag.com/memag/article/articleDetail.jsp?id=116395>

Marketing in the Yellow Pages

http://www.practicemgmt.com/marketing_yellow_pages.html

Internet Marketing

<http://www.WebMasterWorld.com>

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 Edition

Software

Marketing Plan Pro[®] at http://www.paloalto.com/marketing_plan_software/

Office Ready Marketing Plans at <http://templatezone.com/>

Plan Write[®] for Marketing at http://brs-inc.com/marketing_plan.asp