

Growing Your Practice: *How to Attract New Patients and Keep the Ones You Have*

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Effective marketing is the key to ensuring the continual growth of your practice. By taking advantage of the right tools and tactics, you can implement a successful marketing plan without expanding your staff or breaking your budget.

Marketing: Create Demand Without ‘Selling’

This much you know is true: You offer exceptional healthcare services and patients should be willing to travel any distance to your facility because you will deliver the best outcomes. So, how do get this message across to patients without making them feel like you’re trying to “sell” your practice? That’s marketing.

Imagine marketing as a pie with many different slices. Those slices are things like advertising, public relations, customer support, and sales strategy. Each slice must be able to work independently while at the same time contributing towards a common goal.

If you implement your marketing plan correctly, you won’t have to “sell” your practice. You will have already created a demand out of thin air and your practice will grow and develop on its own. This is why many top marketing gurus say that you truly don’t need a sales force if you market correctly. All you’ll need is a well-trained office staff that is properly prepared to schedule new patients and service current patients.

Start With a Plan

The first step in developing a marketing plan is to ask yourself a seemingly simple question: Who are we? Write a description of what your practice actually does. Go into detail about what sets you apart and what should attract patients to your facility over every other. Once you are perfectly clear about “what” you are trying to market, dig into these specifics:

Identify your target audience. Be specific as to the demographics and psychographics of your ideal patient. You’ll want to focus your company’s resources and marketing tactics on these groups.

Set goals. You need to know what your practice wants to achieve in the short- and long-term. Have goals that are concrete, such as revenue targets and the number of new patients you’d like to attract. Concrete goals will help you to keep an eye on the ball at all times.

Identify your competition. Educate yourself about what other practices are offering. Ask yourself if your practice is unique and, if not, find ways to make your practice stand apart.

Establish a marketing budget. Practices often don’t realize how fast expenses can add up. The best way to prevent this is to set aside a specific amount of money per quarter. After each quarter, evaluate your marketing decisions such as advertising in the yellow pages and see how much business that particular initiative actually generated. Track all of your different initiatives but only keep those that are producing results.

Plan your marketing tactics. Come up with a large number of ideas and then slowly rule them out. Be creative and don’t necessarily rule out crazy ideas right away. Pick five different activities you think you will be able to execute within your budget and follow through with them. Make sure you track them and see the results. Continue to do this until you find which initiatives work the best and produce the most results. (Please read below for ideas on marketing tactics.)

Establish a reasonable timetable. Do not set unreasonable expectations and cause yourself unnecessary frustration. However, at the same time, you must be careful not to set goals so far out in the future that you lack a sense of urgency to take action.

Make someone (perhaps yourself) accountable. Even the best marketing plans will fail if they are left in the bottom of your drawer – never to be seen again. Hold someone accountable for taking charge and following through with the execution of your plan.

What do Patients Want?

As you're developing a description of your practice, keep in mind that patients are looking for features they believe demonstrate that one hospital or one practice is better than another.

For example, many patients find more comfort in hospitals that specialize in certain diseases or conditions rather than their local community hospitals. In many parts of the country, patients aren't located near centers of excellence. Many patients who are looking for specialized treatment are willing to travel to get it.

Your Two Audiences: New and Existing Patients

When you are working on your marketing strategy, focus not only on bringing in new patients, but also focus on retaining your current patients. Remember, it costs more money to find a new patient than to keep a current one. Just as important, when a patient leaves your practice, make sure that you find out why he or she left. Even if you can't convince that person to stay, it may give you insight on areas where your practice can improve.

Once you have established a trusting doctor-patient relationship, you can help your patients to better understand the benefits of your services. What can you do to help build a good rapport with your patients?

Get to know your patients, by name. Studies have shown that over 50% of patients will leave a practice because of indifference. Many of them felt that they were taken for granted. What's more, if there were ever a complication with treatment, patients would be more willing to continue seeking care by you instead of legal action if you have a positive relationship.

Train your staff on the ways you expect them to interact with patients. The first impression a person gets when he or she walks in your practice will never be forgotten. A good way to monitor this is to have mystery shoppers come each month and really assess your staff's performance.

Marketing Tactics: Where to Get Started

Once you've identified your audience and what makes your facility unique, it's time to look at ways to get the word out. The key to a successful marketing plan is to make sure you are implementing both internal and external methods. External marketing is finding interested patients outside of your database who are naïve to your practice. This is often more costly than internal marketing and will include things such as advertising on radio and television, conferences, websites, and magazine ads. External marketing tends to be very time consuming and will require more work and research to guarantee you are reaching the correct audience.

Internal marketing, on the other hand, can be much more cost effective when managed correctly. Some marketing tactics would include in-office brochures, pamphlets, and patient referrals. These methods are used to keep patients in your practice. However, it is usually external marketing that will bring them in. Make sure that you are marketing both internally and externally to drive optimal results.

Should We Advertise?

Advertising can be expensive and time consuming. So, is it worth it? A good advertising campaign should do one of three things:

Directly reach your target audience. The results should be easily measurable in terms of things such as new patient leads or attendance at an event.

Reach a larger audience to help build brand recognition. Consider a great example, the successful marketing of Apple. When you walk into an Apple store, you are not going to find people who are selling you a new product. Instead, you are going to find associates who are there to answer any questions because their advertising has already sold itself as the solution to your needs.

Generate goodwill. Advertising in the local high school football team's program may or may not earn you any new patients. However, over time, that goodwill will help establish your reputation as a trusted member of the community.

Bottom line: If you don't believe an advertising opportunity will accomplish any of those things, move along.

Your Patients are on the Internet. Are You?

It can be extremely stressful and confusing for a patient to find a doctor. This has been the driving factor in patients turning to the Internet as a way of easily comparing and finding information for healthcare options. Patients are searching online for everything from a local primary care facility to more complex treatments and even medical travel. One of the most common uses of the Internet for patients is to research breakthrough technologies.

Patients want to know what the best treatments are, where they are offered, how much they cost, and how they can get there. Patients will often find that there is a new surgery that is not available in the U.S, so they will travel abroad. Some patients living outside the US don't have access to newer treatments so they also travel. There are even many cases of patients who travel from state to state for more advanced and specialized care.

Reaching the ‘Medical Traveler’

If you are really marketing yourself as a specialized facility and want to make sure patients can find you, it might be a good marketing strategy to join an Internet network that specializes in this area.

There are listing services and networks, like Health Options Worldwide, that specialize in medical travelers. If you have not already looked into joining a group like this, take a few minutes to research it. These networks are frequented by needy patients who are ready to make a healthcare decision.

Website: A Must Have

If you do not have a website, you need one. It is a must have for every practice. Whether you hire a pro to design your site or use one of the many do-it-yourself website building services, all websites should follow these guidelines:

Have specific goals you hope the site will accomplish. One goal could be to bring in new patients while maintaining the patients you have.

Make sure your contact information is front and center. If it is too difficult for a patient to find this information, he or she most likely will just look for another website that makes it easy.

Include patient information on your website. Talk about certain diseases and illnesses that you treat and provide background information as well as general treatment recommendations.

Including testimonials on your website. These personal stories make it easier for patients to relate. Patients love to hear from other patients.

Consider special patient-centered features such as online scheduling. This is a great way for patients to easily book an appointment at their own convenience.

Include keywords so Google and other search engines find you. Think of the words patients might use when searching for a practice like yours, and include those words in your text (this is known as search engine optimization).

Make sure all of your content is original and not copied. Copied text will not only hurt your Google ranking, but also harm your credibility with patients and your peers. Talk about what you want to offer and patients will have an easier time finding you.

Remember that patients from all over the world are searching for doctors. If you want to increase your opportunity to reach as many potential patients as possible, translate your website into different languages. Also know that many patients even within the U.S. are more comfortable in languages other than English. Allowing them to search your website in another

language gives them a level of trust right from the start. This will also dramatically help with search engine rankings.

Should We Facebook? Creating a Social Media Strategy

Facebook ... Twitter ... LinkedIn. Perhaps you use these social media sites in your private life, but how can you use them to market your practice? Here the key aspects to a successful social media strategy.

Create a pitch for your practice. Keep your pitch short. It is best if you can describe your practice in 120 characters or fewer. As more and more patients use their mobile devices for information, having a short and precise pitch is crucial.

Find one point of your social media strategy and stick with it. Focus on a goal such as increasing patient awareness, finding new patients, or improving patient loyalty.

Understand the exact relationship between you and your audience. Find out what your audience knows about you and work to improve it. Pick out two segments of people to focus on, such as “those who have never heard of you” and “those who barely know you.” Make it your goal to educate them on who you are. It would be extremely difficult to concentrate on patients who know nothing about you and patients who have been to your office before because they are too different. Focus on one group at a time and you will see better results.

Understand how your target audience uses social media. Get as detailed as possible. You might do research and find that there are certain outlets that your patients use more frequently based on their gender, age, and geography. Then you can create more specific marketing to them.

Know the “soul” of your brand. What is the one thing that defines your practice? Every large company that has been extremely successful with marketing has been able to make their name known for one thing. Some examples could be Volvo being known for safety; Disney being paired up with magic; Apple being seen as innovation. Recognize your “one thing” and work to market yourself as that.

Find a way to make your social media personal. Remember that you want to be seen as a person your patients can relate to – not just a logo or a big company. Find ways to let your guard down and be seen as more human. This usually isn’t too difficult for smaller practices. However, sometimes we forget how easy it is to stop interacting on that personal level with our patients.

Measure your success. It is important before you get started to focus on a few key metrics. These will differ based on your objectives with a social media program and may include, creating a following, having a location for open communication with patients, or attracting new patients.

Targeted E-mail Marketing

With targeted e-mail marketing, you want to create specific target groups for your e-mails and send out different e-mails focused on each specific group. Many practices think they are using targeted e-mail marketing, but really have only one database with all their contacts and send out the same newsletters and updates to everyone in their database. This is not targeted marketing.

The first step is to separate your contacts into different categories and create more targeted e-mails. Create and maintain lists that are separated into different groups such as current patients, potential patients, men, and women. The more specific, the better. Once this is completed, create custom e-mails and analyze your database. It may be time consuming, but the hard work will pay off and will lead to more productive marketing efforts with proven payoffs. Some creative and effective ways to use targeted e-mail include:

Appointment reminders. When a patient is scheduled for a certain procedure, send him or her an e-mail that describes exactly what they must do before their surgery. For example, tell them if they are not to drink water the night before or not to eat anything in the morning. This will also help to eliminate questions and problems the day of their procedure.

Cross-promotion. Something that plastic surgeons have been doing for years that all practices can implement is cross-promoting your services. Just because a patient comes in to see you for one condition, it doesn't mean he or she might not be interested in something else. Just remember that an e-mail gets the best results when you are sending the right message to the right individual.

Don't be Too Cute and Other Marketing Pitfalls

Many practices will aim for a clever or humorous marketing strategy to try and engage new patients. Often times the punch line will instead just overshadow the treatment or condition you are trying to promote. Instead, it is important to emphasize things like your success rate, specialty services you offer, why patients should choose you and what makes you better than similar practices.

Another common misconception is that your office only needs to be implementing one marketing mechanism at a time. Many practices just utilize one slice of the marketing pie. If you implement multiple aspects of your marketing plan at the same time, you will see an even greater return on your investment. It is important to realize that any of the many elements of your marketing plan (telemarketing, brochures, advertisements, website, etc.) are just a drop in the bucket. Diversify your marketing initiatives and create many different ways for patients to find your information.

Finally, don't make the mistake of thinking that marketing will be an immediate "panacea" for practice. Patients won't be knocking down the doors of your practice the day after you send out a flyer or the day after you run a radio advertisement.

Well-planned marketing efforts will pay off and increase your patients. But it will not happen overnight. Don't expect miracles to happen. Be persistent, and you will see results.

Marketing Isn't Everything

Marketing is important to the success of your practice, but your marketing efforts will never succeed if you don't first know your business inside and out. Know what separates you from every other practice. In fact, try this exercise: Define your practice including what makes you different in one sentence that you can say in less than 8 seconds. (Some people call this your "elevator pitch.") By knowing your goals and what's important, you can help ensure your marketing campaign's success.

Also, it may sound like a no-brainer, but make a special effort to know your patients. Know who they are and, if possible, get to know them by name. Know what your patients consider valuable. Find ways to make them feel special. It is important to be a practice that sets itself apart from the rest. Whether it is performing a special procedure, greeting patients with a smile at your front desk, knowing your patients by name or having short wait times, find a way to set yourself apart from the rest.

How HOW Can Help

While you can implement many of the marketing tactics above on your own, you will need help along the way. Partnering with the right experts can not only help improve the results of your marketing efforts, but can also lower your costs for attracting and retaining patients.

Health Options Worldwide (HOW) is a one-of-a-kind interactive community that helps hospitals and private practices connect with patients from around the globe. Insured patients can use our website to find worldwide medical experts or additional treatment options for their condition. Uninsured or underinsured patients can search for quality, affordable treatments across state lines, or even around the world.

In short, HOW gives healthcare providers the opportunity to showcase their skills to a global audience of patients who want the best possible care and are willing to make extraordinary efforts to access it. To learn more, visit www.healthoptionsworldwide.com or call (877) 234- 1345.