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Guest Columnist



Why most practices' marketing efforts fall short

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Too many practices think they are marketing when they are really just approaching the subject with little hits here and there. They'll run a *Yellow Pages* ad and have an annual patient appreciation day. But you can't stop there. Successful marketing in today's competitive health care environment calls for a strategic plan. Your plan should establish a platform for a practice's unique selling proposition with outcomes focused on quality, growth, customer satisfaction, and financial returns.

If this sounds more like marketing a candy bar, you're right. But effective promotional techniques for physician practices borrow the traditional lessons learned from consumer marketing.

The backbone of consumer-based marketing has been a marketing platform based on two things: an understanding of your customer, coupled with a commitment to provide exceptional customer service. Here are some specific steps your practice can take:

- **Have a written marketing plan that articulates specific, targeted, measurable, and trackable objectives that support and carry out key objectives of a strategic plan.**

Keep the marketing team focused and accountable for its part in implementing a successful marketing strategy. Use action plans that detail tasks, time frames, and accountable parties. Have a system in place to make sure that it is a priority and that it happens.

- **Although marketing professionals spearhead the process, marketing is everyone's job.**

Involve the practice in brainstorming, and solicit participation from everyone from your receptionist to billers.

- **Know your marketplace.**

Have you defined a service area, geographically and demographically? Where are your greatest opportunities for growth? Statistically, it's easier to grow new volume from new residents or those changing health plans. Does your strategy include targeting new movers through established and innovative means? One example: a direct mail piece for new residents offering a roadside emergency kit that can be redeemed at your practice.

- **Recognize that health care is a service-oriented business.**

As such, differentiate service and offerings based on your practice's unique service aspects. Strive to be a customer service innovator in this area.

- **Know your customers.**

Where is your current patient base coming from? Why did they choose your practice? Survey patients and referral sources to find out.

- **Keep in front of customers.**

Patient newsletters can be a good vehicle to continue to serve your patients with education and remind them of other ways you can meet their needs, for example, through flu shots or back-to-school physicals. This not only reinforces to patients what a wise choice they made in choosing your practice; if timed correctly, it can help build patient volume during normally slow times of the year.

- **Keep marketing initiatives appropriate for where your practice is in its life cycle.**

Think of marketing as a critical component for survival of a new or growing practice, not something to do once a practice is successful. But don't create more demand that you can service in a quality manner.

- **Broaden your understanding of marketing to encompass integrated business development.**

This includes market research, advertising, sales, public relations and both internal and external service. The strength of integrated business development is its linkage of key business development practices that provide synergy and create leverage for better outcomes and improved return on investment.

- **Advertising is not just a knee-jerk reaction to a persuasive sales pitch.**

Before making a commitment, ask yourself if the ad will support or detract from your business strategy.

- **Be visible in your community.**

Community goodwill, such as speaking at functions and to reporters in a market you serve, is important and should be accounted for in a marketing plan's public relations component. ■