



PHYSICIAN PRACTICE RESOURCE CENTER

PPRC is a service for physicians provided by the Massachusetts Medical Society

Medical Practice Marketing

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Understanding Your Market

Developing strong relationships with patients and other physician practices has historically been a critical component of any practice's marketing program. Primary care physicians (PCPs) usually promote their practices directly to patients, while specialists tend to market their services primarily to PCPs and other physicians. In general, PCPs rely on established patients to generate word-of-mouth recommendations that help attract new patients, while specialists concentrate on referral relationships with other physicians. In recent years, to remain competitive in a marketplace that has a high health insurance coverage turnover rate, physician practices are forced to market their services to health plans and employers.

To most effectively market a medical practice, you should first have a clear understanding of the environment in which you are practicing. If you are opening a new practice, a new satellite office, or if you are practicing in a highly competitive area, you will want to spend extra time researching the area. However, if you have been practicing for years in a small town, it is not always necessary to undertake a detailed analysis. Instead you may wish to focus on recent changes in the community. For example, an established practice attempting to increase its patient base may simply spend a few hours thinking about the community before implementing a new marketing technique that fits into its existing strategy. Regardless of your specific situation, your marketing efforts are likely to be most successful if they are tailored to the environment in which you are practicing.

As you begin to understand the marketplace, it is helpful to develop marketing goals to help achieve broader objectives. These goals need to be specific so you can monitor progress to determine if your strategic plan of action is successful or requires refinement.

Community Demographics

If you are starting a new practice or opening a new practice location, it will be helpful to gather demographic data for that area. Gathering this information is relatively easy if you ask your staff to write a description of the community or circulate a set of questions to discuss at a staff meeting. If your hospital has a planning, marketing or public relations department, they may be willing to share some of this demographic data with you. You can also obtain demographic information for any Commonwealth Community from the state of Massachusetts website: www.state.ma.us/cc/.

In particular, take note of the following community characteristics: population growth rates, age and sex distribution, racial and ethnic groups, education level, average income, home values and percentage of rental properties. Another important characteristic to understand is the availability of public transportation and parking at or near your office, which could directly impact the patients that can access your practice.

Another way to gain insight into the demographics of a community is to ask local businesses about their health benefits programs and determine if they require employment or annual physical examinations, treatment of work-related injuries,

worksite safety activities, or rehabilitation services. The benefits and services offered by local employers is a good indicator of what will be successful in the marketplace.

Local Health Care Services

In addition to community demographic information, it is helpful to learn about the health care facilities and providers in your area. This information can help you decide on a convenient location for a new office, when to schedule office hours, and the best way to advertise to reach the greatest number of new residents in the community. To gain a better understanding of the health care services offered in a community, determine the number of hospitals, nursing homes, assisted living communities, etc., that are nearby. If you are affiliated with any of these organizations, review their inpatient population because you will likely serve patients from the same geographical area. Any new facilities that are under construction in the community should also be considered.

You should learn who all the physicians are in your area because they will be both your competitors and potential referral sources. Inquire about the size of each physician group practice and what special services they provide. Folio Associates prints a Medical Directory of all physicians in Massachusetts that you can purchase for \$81 by calling 800-223-2233 or visiting www.foliomed.com. The Massachusetts Directory also includes a listing of all hospitals, nursing homes, managed care organizations, ambulatory care centers, and group practices by town.

After you have located the names, addresses and specialties of the physicians and other healthcare organizations in your community, mark their location on a map. It is often helpful to use colors or symbols to indicate different health care providers and organizations to assess advantages or disadvantages of your practice, your geographic location, distance from competitors, and distance from other practices that could affect referrals.

Established Patients

If you are established in a community, you have easy access to the information needed to develop a profile of your practice. If possible, study your total patient population by extracting information from your practice management system, or randomly select a few hundred active patient records to analyze. In particular, you should know the age of your patients, their residence and working locations, your primary sources of payment, and have a general idea of your practice capacity. Work with your staff on this project and ask them all to write down how they think the profile will look because it is often very close to actual data. If your computer cannot easily generate the data needed, assign each member of your staff specific data to collect to expedite the process.

There are differences in the age and sex of patients among specialties, but the average practice has a patient population of approximately 45 percent male and 55 percent female. A review of patient's zip codes will probably reveal that most patients live near your office. Determine if physical barriers, such as highways or rivers, or competitors prevent residents in local zip codes from reaching your office. If your community is growing and you want to serve this new population, your marketing strategy should be

designed to make your practice visible in select neighborhoods, and involve contacts with newcomer clubs, civic organizations, schools and new physicians. If your community is stable, your marketing activities may be centered on increasing and maintaining patient satisfaction, adding services that will serve the needs of your current patients and involvement in ongoing community services.

Communicating to your existing patients all the services available for their immediate or extended family members is another easy way to increase your practice's patient base. An office with a comfortable atmosphere that emphasizes personal touches, such as commenting on known activities of family members or recognition of family stresses, while adhering to HIPAA standards, are strategies that increase patient satisfaction and generate more word-of-mouth referrals to other family members and friends.

Other useful data that can be extracted from your appointment records includes: total visits per year, average number of visits per month and whether the patient load has significant seasonal variations. As you review the data look for changes to the number of active patients, percentage of new patients that return for follow-up visits, and the number of new patients or ancillary services that could be added without adding additional staff. If you are new in practice and have less than one year's experience to track, try extrapolating from the data you do have but recognize that you may miss seasonal variations. This analysis helps determine practice capacity and to predict how the addition of new patients might affect your practice.

If you currently provide any ancillary services, develop a list of the services most commonly performed in your office, such as electrocardiograms, stress tests, and laboratory tests. Determine if there are any patterns in the data that may indicate additional services that could be useful to patients. A close review of patient characteristics or ancillary services utilization may indicate the predominance of one disease in your practice. If this is the case, you might consider adding disease-management group visits, or providing additional ancillary services that address the special needs of this patient population and their families.

Referrals

There are many different sources of referrals, so it is important to balance these contacts and not become too dependent on one source. Specialists will have a high percentage of physician referrals but should network with other health care professionals for additional patients. PCPs can expect to gain a large percentage of their referrals from satisfied patients. To encourage these referrals, special acknowledgement should be given, especially when multiple referrals come from the same source.

The first step in analyzing referrals is to obtain accurate data on your current referral patterns. The information sheet that new patients are asked to complete should include a question about how they discovered your practice. If you are already recording this information using a computer system, this data should be easy to extract. An alternative is to have office staff ask new patients how they heard about your practice and record the information manually.

New patients that are referred to your practice by established patients is a positive sign. Patient referrals are usually a sign that patients feel comfortable with office staff and believe they are receiving high quality care from their physician. If you are not receiving a significant number of referrals from patients, consider surveying them to determine how satisfied they are with the services your office provides. (See “Patient Satisfaction Surveys” below.)

Office staff should be equipped to refer patients to your practice by carrying business cards and distributing them to anyone who asks about the practice. In some practices, financial incentive programs or bonuses based on the number of individual referrals or on the overall growth of the practice help to assure that office staff are promoting the practice and its services. Incentive programs and bonuses should be reviewed by legal counsel to ensure compliance with health care laws, such as the anti-kickback statute.

Reviewing referrals from other physicians, and the income generated by providing medical care to these patients, is another area that should be closely evaluated. You may discover that some physicians only refer patients with particular health insurance coverage. Discovering these trends, both positive and negative, and making attempts to change the disadvantageous trends before they become widespread is worth the effort.

As you review the data from your practice, look at the number of new patients that you anticipated from your participation in particular health plans. Determine if the contracts you signed are allowing patients to continue treatment that might have otherwise had to leave your practice. Also, determine if participation in these plans has altered the pattern of your referrals to other physicians.

Local businesses may be another important source of referrals for your practice. You can encourage these referrals by providing services to one or more companies, such as employment physicals or safety lectures, to encourage employees to visit your office for additional treatment. Distributing a brochure about your practice to the human resources department is also helpful to give your practice added visibility and explain the services that you can offer new employees.

Patient Satisfaction Surveys

Measuring patient satisfaction is a process that should be carefully planned to include both the survey design and the implementation of system changes once the results are tabulated. Patient satisfaction surveys typically cover: access, communication between the patient and office, courtesy and helpfulness of the office staff, and physician-patient interaction. The physical environment of your office can play an important role in the satisfaction of your patients as well. Asking patients about a few specific items may encourage them to suggest other improvements for your practice. The MMS is also working with the Massachusetts Health Quality Partners (MHQP) on a statistically significant “Patient Experience Survey” that will evaluate patient satisfaction in practices across the state. For more information on this topic, review the PPRC Resource on Patient Satisfaction Surveying at: www.massmed.org/pages/pprc.asp.

Another way to assess patient satisfaction is to survey the patients who have left your practice to determine why they left. You could try contacting patients that ask to have records sent to another physician. If they are simply moving out of your area, which is common for many patients requesting records, you have an opportunity to wish them well in their new location. If they are changing practices because of new health insurance that you do not cover, you might consider a new contract with this health plan.

Office Staff Evaluation

In many practices, office staff spend more time with patients than physicians. Patients respond to all of the treatment they receive, not just the physical examination and consultation provided by the physician, so it is important to assess how well office staff are performing their duties. Asking staff to rate themselves on their service to patients is a good reminder of basic patient relations. You may discover differences of opinion that are worth discussing at future staff meetings or performance reviews.

Another way to find out how well you are doing is to ask your staff to anonymously assess your practice and suggest ways that it could be improved. Ask office staff to assess their personal capabilities, the services of the practice, the building and working environment, and the overall strengths and weaknesses of the practice. It is also helpful to allow office staff to make suggestions on how to make improvements in these areas.

Financial Analysis

A financial analysis gives a practice an indication of how well it is doing, helps identify strengths and weaknesses, and begins to define problems and opportunities that might be addressed in a marketing strategy. Conduct a financial analysis that reviews the practice's profit-and-loss statement, tax returns, accounts receivable, billing records and insurance claim files. Your accountant may recommend additional ways to collect or organize important financial facts. If your billing system is computerized, much of the information you need should be readily available in routine reports.

Run reports using your billing system or manually record the sources of payment for services. In general, your patients should come from a mix of health plans so that you do not become reliant on reimbursement from one payer. While it is not easy to restore balance in a practice that has become dependent upon a few sources of reimbursement, this analysis will help identify if there is a potential financial danger that could be improved by seeking a different mix of patients.

Your accountant may also help you look at the profitability of individual procedures and help determine if new services could be added or existing services discontinued. Although profitability is important, other factors must be taken into consideration as well because you may offer services that do not produce direct revenue, but increase patient satisfaction and new patient referrals that enhance the overall profitability of the practice.

If overall practice growth appears to be the key to long-term financial success, a campaign to attract new patients may be your goal. On the other hand, if providing more

services to existing patients will meet your objectives, you may want to build a marketing strategy around adding and promoting a new procedure. Determine what your population wants and needs from your practice and plan an information campaign to let them know how you can serve. In most cases, the marketing strategies will include retaining patients, improving services to them, and growth.

Marketing to Patients

Even in today's complex health insurance marketplace, physician recommendations from family members and friends are vital to the success of a medical practice. Generating word-of-mouth referrals requires a commitment from your entire office to provide your current patients with efficient and friendly service. The difference today is that physicians must contract with the same health plans that their patient populations use. Your success is also dependent on health plan provider directories, so be sure your practice is accurately listed on the Internet and in all print directories. Once these health plan details are in order, you will be more accessible to new patients.

Patients are increasingly pressuring physicians to consider quality of care initiatives for their practice as well. For this reason, it may be useful to participate in the AMA's Physician Consortium for Performance Improvement, which aims to provide performance measurement resources for practicing physicians to facilitate implementation of clinical quality improvement programs. By participating in The Consortium, you will obtain performance measures that represent a consensus of experts in clinical and research fields and include those measurable activities in which physicians can participate to continuously improve quality of care and outcomes. To learn more about The Consortium visit www.ama-assn.org/go/quality.

Physician-Patient Communication

Your thoroughness in explaining the patient's illness and treatment plan is one way of demonstrating your knowledge and your personal concern. Whenever possible, take time with patients because patients that leave your office with unanswered questions are more likely to be dissatisfied with the service received, even if their condition improves. When communicating with patients try to maintain eye contact and listen carefully to what they have to say. When you explain diagnoses and treatment plans talk in laymen's terms so patients can understand what you are saying. If you are concerned about the perception that you are rushing too much, you might consider asking your staff to help you identify these situations. This is helpful when dealing with patients that do not ask questions because they believe they would be imposing on your busy schedule.

If you are treating a patient with a chronic disease, you can provide them with educational materials related to their illness and treatment options at the end of office visits. This will reinforce that you want to work collaboratively with them and care about their recovery. For some practices, providing patient education is an important part of treatment so their reception area, examination rooms, and practice website are vehicles that are used to communicate the practice's commitment to disease prevention and health promotion.

A practice newsletter is an excellent way to provide information and news about various illnesses, treatments and disease prevention tips that are of particular importance to your patients and their families. It is also a good way to inform patients about changes in the practice, such as new staff, and events that affect the services of the practice. Each time the newsletter is mailed to patients, the name of the practice gains greater visibility. If your practice collects patient email addresses, send the newsletter via email. If you have a website, also consider sending a message to all of your patients with a link to the most current newsletter that has been posted online. This will increase the likelihood that patients will visit your website and discover something new about your practice. You may also be surprised to learn that existing patients are sharing your newsletter with family and friends that could become new patients.

Take every opportunity to send personal communications to your patients, especially promptly notifying patients of test results, even if they are normal. Other ideas for personal communications include: sending birthday cards to established patients, mailing welcome letters to new patients that include a brochure about the practice, sending follow-up notes to remind patients of the need for physicals, immunizations or checkups, and sending thank you notes whenever a patient refers a friend or family member to you.

Office Policies and Accessibility

Practice location, access to physicians by phone or email, timely appointments, short waiting times, and easy access to the office are all part of operating a practice that is convenient for patients. If many of your patients are elderly, be sure that your office building has good access for patients using wheelchairs, and that the seats in your waiting room have arms and are high enough so patients can sit and rise easily. If many of your patients find it difficult to schedule appointments during traditional office hours, consider offering early morning, evening or weekend appointments on some days of the month. Work with your staff to see how the appointment schedule might be revised so that patients can get an appointment within the same week that they call and not have to wait more than 15 minutes after their scheduled appointment time in the reception area.

Shorter wait times are also a good way to attract new patients that do not have a relationship with you or your practice. Keep a list of patients who want to be seen as soon as possible and call them when a cancellation occurs. You might also consider adopting an open access (same day) scheduling system, which will require careful planning and several weeks to implement, but has many potential benefits for you and your patients.

Investigate the feasibility of opening a satellite office so that you will be accessible for patients in multiple geographic locations. Careful planning should be done before taking on the added expense of another office, but the added patient base could make it a worthwhile investment. It may also be possible to share or switch offices with other physicians who would like to have more than one office location.

Establish a system for reminding patients of the need for follow-up visits. A computerized recall system based on age, condition and a recommended physical examination schedule can send emails to patients automatically or simply produce a list of patients who need to be sent appointment reminders. If you do not have a practice management system, have your office staff maintain a list of patients to be recalled. If you need to see a patient for a follow-up appointment in six months, put their name on a list to be reminded in five months. Some practices give patients a postcard as they are completing their office visit and ask them to address it to themselves. The card is pre-printed with a message that says it is time to call the office for an appointment. The office staff retains the post card and mails it at the appropriate recall date. Doing so takes very little time, builds the practice, and reinforces the need for continuing care.

An area that is often overlooked is the answering service or machine that receives your after-hours calls. Most patients prefer to talk to a person, but this is not always possible. An answering machine could ask people to call during regular hours for an appointment, indicate a specific time that your practice is available for urgent care visits, or provide the number of the answering service or emergency department to call if it is an emergency.

Patient parking at your office should be free and have copies of schedules and routes available for patients who may need public transportation. It may also be beneficial to partner with other practices or businesses to provide a free shuttle from public transportation terminals, or nearby parking lots.

Provide patients a copy of your payment policy in your welcome letter or during their initial visit. When payment, credit and collection policies are carefully explained, it will reduce the severity and quantity of billing related problems for your office staff. Unexpected or unexplained policies and procedures are likely to be a source of annoyance to your patients. Request copayments and payment of outstanding balances at the time of service by accepting credit cards, giving patients a stamped envelope to send their check to your office, or work out a payment plan while the patient is in the office. This will minimize administrative costs and avoid misunderstandings over the phone.

When you do send patient statements out, be sure to itemize all charges and fees to minimize any misunderstandings. When appropriate, notify patients of disputes with an insurance plan as early as possible. This can drastically improve collection rates and avoids confrontations with angry patients that receive bills months after the date of service because your office has exhausted all efforts with their health plan.

Contacting Employers

If you want to increase access to potential patients, try contacting the people who employ them and pay for their health insurance. By contacting local employers your practice will gain visibility and develop opportunities for potential patients to familiarize themselves with your practice. Deciding which companies are worth contacting may require a little research. Determine which types of health insurance local companies are offering to employees and confirm that you are contracted with these plans. Have one of your staff members contact employers to explain the services you provide, and leave brochures and

literature behind for posting on bulletin boards and distribution to employees by other appropriate means. It may also be helpful to meet with the company's human resources manager and other staff that are responsible for the health and safety of employees. These individuals are often tasked with referring patients who become ill or are injured on the job.

You may also consider meeting with the management of a company to fully understand their needs and convey your commitment to keeping their employees healthy and on the job. During this meeting it is also helpful to explain that while your main concern is serving the firm's employees, your practice does not over-utilize services and is committed to practicing cost-effective, quality medicine. To interact directly with employees, you might consider offering periodic on-site events such as blood pressure or cholesterol screenings, or seminars on various health-related topics. If your office is the closest health care facility to an employer, you may also want to volunteer your services in emergency situations to show your commitment to the health of the community. As appropriate, encourage the employer to refer patients to you for employment and ongoing physical examinations, treatment of work-related injuries, and rehabilitation services.

Marketing to Health Care Providers

The key to maintaining collegial relationships is to constantly be in contact and show your appreciation for every referral within the confines of the law. To build new relationships make a list of people to call or visit in person. Commit yourself to a measurable goal, such as one contact each day, to increase your visibility to professionals who can refer patients to you.

Ask your staff to keep a referral log with a section for each referring physician and list the patients that the doctor refers. Review the log every few months to determine if it shows an increase or decrease from a group or individual physician. If it appears that a physician is not sending you as many referrals as in the past, contact them to see if there is anything you can do, within the confines of the law, to encourage additional referrals.

Your referring colleagues often attend the same meetings that you do, so review your referral log ahead of time so you can thank them for a referral or remind them of the good service that you provide. A satisfied patient is your best advertising with other physicians. Patients who have been treated well usually tell their referring physicians and a good referring physician will usually ask.

If you are a specialist and depend heavily on referrals from colleagues, target specific primary care physicians from whom you would like to receive patients and build an organized campaign to get their support. Call these colleagues to explain your specialty, credentials, experience, hospital affiliations, and the services offered by your practice. Follow-up with them every few months and thank them for any patients they send to you.

When you receive a referral, keep the referring doctor informed of the patient's progress by sending reports and/or information on the treatment that you provided as soon as

possible. If your collegial referral system is crucial to your practice, plan to talk with physicians when you are on rounds, in the hospital lounge or cafeteria, during social or recreational events, as well as regular hospital and medical society meetings.

Another important area to concentrate on is maintaining a good rapport with the nurses, physical therapists, social workers, nutritionists, and clergy who treat or regularly visit patients in the hospital. Pharmacists in your community are another potential source of referrals that should not be ignored. If you distribute a patient newsletter, be sure to send a copy to these health care providers as well. Remind these people of your name and specialty, and the name(s) of recent referrals that they sent to you.

Remember that anything you do to enhance your medical reputation in the eyes of your peers, including teaching, speaking, or publishing, is likely to help your referrals. Consider writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper when a health issue is in the headlines. Then let your colleagues know what you have done through your newsletter with a special letter citing recent educational programs that you have attended and how that education might serve their patients. Send copies of appropriate articles that you have written, including copies of letters that you have written to editors, with the intent of informing your colleagues and not boasting about your success.

If your practice is highly dependent on referrals, keep some time slots open on your appointment book for them just as you would for urgent visits. It is also important that you don't steal patients, so when your treatment of a patient is complete, they should be returned to their PCP at a clinically appropriate time for subsequent care. Try to avoid assuming responsibility for any treatment that is not related to the immediate problem that the patient was referred to you for without first consulting with the referring physician. If you want to encourage referrals from other physicians, find out if they have internal policies for patient referrals and do everything you can to work within that framework. If you must see a patient that was referred to you for multiple visits, provide the referring physician with information about the diagnosis and treatment plan when appropriate. Finally, be sure to inform a PCP before referring a patient to another specialist, as some health insurance plans may require another referral.

Provide colleagues with a self-addressed, postage-paid form so they can easily tell you the reason for the referral, prior treatment, insurance coverage, etc. If there are new physicians entering your community, welcome them to the area and let them know what services you offer by sending them a copy of your patient brochure or any other information you typically send to referring physicians. Offer to conduct a staff meeting with the office staff of referring physicians to tell them about your specialty, what patients can expect in your office, financial policies and any other information that might simplify the referral process for their office staff. A business lunch arranged for the receptionists in both of your practices is another way to improve referral relationships and improve business for both practices.

Marketing to Health Plans

Health plans play a major role in determining the physicians that a patient may see, which is drastically different from the fee-for-service environment of years ago. While patients are mostly concerned about the quality of care they receive, health plans are always looking to control costs while providing access to care for their members. If you want to be accepted into health plan provider networks it is helpful to understand what is required of physicians to be properly credentialed and enrolled.

Most health plans are looking for quantifiable evidence of the quality of care you provide to patients. They are also required to meet certain standards for accreditation, such as NCQA. To control costs, health plans may prefer to contract with physicians that are part of a risk unit or other group network model. In addition, plans typically look for board certification and other physician accreditation sources as a measure for quality of care. If you have received positive patient satisfaction results, you may choose to share them with health plans as well.

If you are entering a market saturated with physicians in your specialty, you may try taking the time to meet with the medical directors or other health plan representatives to stand out from the crowd and explain your practice. Any presentation should be carefully planned, keeping in mind that the main objective is to convey your commitment to provide efficient, cost-effective care with high levels of patient satisfaction. If you are unable to meet a representative in person, mail the medical director information about your practice and follow up a week or so later with a phone call. This correspondence should include:

- Practice name, office location(s) and area served. Also include a mission statement or a statement of objectives, including your commitment to quality care, etc.
- Special practice characteristics, such as extended hours, convenient locations, in-office ancillary services, and patient education techniques that reduce excessive patient visits.
- Physician CVs or resumes.
- Names of all office personnel and their certifications.
- A list of referring physicians in the plan, if you are a specialist.
- Evidence of treatment patterns following published protocols or guidelines, outcome studies, or information demonstrating your practice's quality and efficiency.
- Patient satisfaction survey results and indications of improvement over time.

Once you have signed a provider agreement, be sure to maintain personal contacts with health plan representatives and appropriate medical directors to strengthen your relationship and help you down the road.

Enhancing Practice Visibility

Practice Web Sites

The importance of practice websites has grown considerably in recent years, particularly with improved health plan sites that include provider directories online. New health plan

enrollees are increasingly choosing their primary care physicians using online directories. If only a handful of the practices in a town has a link to their web site in the directory, a new patient is more likely to investigate these practices first. Knowing as much as possible about a new physician is very important for new patients and helps improve the physician-patient relationship.

There are multiple ways to create a practice web site including: free services, such as Medem (www.medem.com); lower cost solutions, such as hiring a student to design your site; and finally outsourcing the project to a professional firm specializing in web design. A practice web site can be as simple as providing the practice name and address or as complex as providing online scheduling software and secure email messaging for patients. For example, Medem offers online consultations that allows physicians to securely communicate online with patients and receive payment for their work. Medem also allows office staff to communicate online with patients, other health care providers and trading partners through a simple, secure, eRisk and HIPAA-compliant network. Regardless of the exact mechanisms used, it is important that the style of the practice is properly communicated through a web site.

Once you have attracted patients to your site, it is important to have information well organized that communicates the philosophies of practice. Some items to consider posting on your web site include: Names and specialties of all physicians and support staff, the specific services offered, health plans that are accepted, directions to your office, recent health news, a practice newsletter, and information on the practice's policies. Hyperlinks to clinical information that you feel is useful can enhance the content of your site and improve patient relations. However, it is equally important to continuously update the content on your site so your patients receive the most current information. If you are providing incorrect or out-of-date information on your web site, it may actually deter patients from your practice, as well as create some legal liability, so you need to be cognizant of the message the site is sending to prospective patients.

Once your web site has been created, be sure to register it with the major search engines, such as Yahoo and Google, and inform your health plans so they can create hyperlinks from their online provider directory to your site. Finally, put your web address on all letterhead, new patient correspondence, brochures, business cards, and any printed materials that you distribute.

As the importance of your web site begins to grow, you might consider adding additional services online to increase patient satisfaction levels. Some practices are adding secure email messaging to their website to increase office efficiency and provide improved service for patients. Clear policies on how patient email will be handled must be developed, but the results can enhance the appeal of your practice. Other practices are scheduling appointments, processing prescription renewals, and streamlining a number of administrative functions by using interfaces on their website to improve patient satisfaction and practice workflow simultaneously.

Community Involvement

Being active in your community by joining local medical organizations, volunteering with community groups, regularly attending a place of worship, and joining service organizations increases your visibility and enhances your practice. If you are a good public speaker, contact local civic, religious, and other organizations and offer to speak on a variety of medical topics. Contacting your local television and radio stations and suggesting specific health topics for talk shows is another idea worth considering.

Relationships between the media and physicians do not occur overnight, but the long-term payoffs in practice visibility can be worth the extra effort. Newspaper and television reporters work in a fast-paced environment driven by deadlines, so be sure to promptly return phone calls and be prepared to take 15 minutes out of your afternoon schedule to speak with them. The demand for health related information is rapidly increasing and as a physician you have a great opportunity to educate the media and the public, while simultaneously promoting your practice. If you are interested in public speaking or working with the media and would like additional information, contact the MMS Communications Department at 800-322-2303 ext. 7102.

If public speaking is not your forte, you can write a health column for local newspapers or volunteer to write an employee newsletter column for a local business. Keep the language simple and choose subjects that are of general interest or are timely such as water safety in the summer or receiving flu shots in the fall.

Organizing a health screening at a community center, shopping mall, or nursing home is a great way for you and your office staff to meet potential patients. Hosting an open house in your office is another way to meet members of the community. Creating a theme or celebrating a particular event, such as Breast Cancer Awareness Month, ten years in practice, or introducing a new partner, bring added attention to the event and your office. Publicize the event well in advance with local newspapers, community groups and schools and inform all of your established patients by giving them a special invitation.

Traditional Advertising

Although paid advertising is increasing for larger health care organizations, its appropriate use for physician practices is still debated. An advertising campaign is expensive and requires staff time, but is often used to announce new developments in a practice or provide public education. Physician practices typically advertise in the Yellow Pages, however only a few purchase a slightly enlarged ad in the physician listings to stand out from others. Some practices also believe using bold type or a box about the size of your business card will make your name more prominent. If space permits, use your logo and identify special characteristics that set your practice apart, such as weekend office hours or board certification status.

A practice brochure is another traditional marketing tool that can explain your specialty, services offered, and describe how your practice operates. Keep in mind that a brochure is only an introduction to your practice, so only provide enough information to entice patients to contact your office for an appointment.

Designing a logo with the help of a professional is advisable, however with the help of inexpensive graphics software, many smaller practices are able to enlist the help of a friend or family member. Place your logo on all stationery, business cards, invoices, newsletters, prescription pads, brochures, and signs. You can also place your logo and practice name on health-related gifts for patients. These items could include telephone stickers and pencils for recording emergency numbers, medical identification bracelets, patient education materials, Band-aids, etc.

A welcome letter for new residents that includes a copy of your patient brochure, a map showing the location of your office, and the hospitals you are affiliated with can generate new business. Contact real estate agencies in your area to purchase lists of new families and mail the packet to each of them.

The sign outside your office building is an important marketing tool, so select signs that are clearly visible while not clashing with other signs in the neighborhood. Consider placing your logo on the sign as well. Once inside your building, be sure that patients can find your office, and that doors are appropriately labeled, such as: “Employees Only,” “Laboratory,” “Private,” or “Reception Area”).

Advertising is regulated by the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine (243 CMR 2.07(11)). These regulations can be accessed at www.massmedboard.org/regs/. You should consider consulting with a private attorney if you need assistance with compliance.

Adding New Services

Another way to increase visibility is to add or expand the services that your practice provides. Partnering with another practice may offer additional office locations, greater appeal to health plans seeking larger groups for their provider networks, more resources for a marketing campaign or an opportunity to expand the services that you currently offer. Adding new ancillary services to generate more revenue for the practice also benefits patients with increased convenience. However, before making any decisions, all possibilities should be fully considered.

A cost benefit analysis should be conducted first because adding more ancillary services does not guarantee an increase in net revenue after expenses. Typically, new services should break even financially to justify the added patient convenience. To determine the profitability of a new procedure or service record the number of patients that you currently refer to another facility. Then estimate the revenue you could expect based on the volume from your current referral patterns. Finally, subtract the expenses you would incur (e.g. equipment, staff salaries, office renovations, overhead) to provide a new service or procedure to estimate how profitable it could be. Your attorney should also be consulted before adding any new services to ensure that you are in compliance with the federal Stark laws on physician self-referral.

Some examples of new services being offered by physician practices include: Hiring a social worker to help with the living arrangements for the elderly; adding special assistance services for patients with chronic diseases; and developing or promoting support groups for patients with particular diseases to gain referrals. Some practices have also recommend that their referring physicians send patients to these support groups to strengthen the referral relationships with these practices. Group visits are an alternative solution that will require some changes to your practice style, but have been highly successful in practices with patients that have similar health problems. Patients are very satisfied with this treatment method and can have better outcomes because they are actively involved in their care. Depending on your specialty, there are a myriad of services to offer that can benefit both your practice and your patients.

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