

By Richard Wall

marketing IMPASSION

Care and compassion are superior selling points, but only if medical providers live up to that potent and promissory message

Medical marketing may seem like a magic act, wherein you levitate the bottom line without appearing to be doing just that. Since consumers are likely to be more pinched by costs and more apt to be doing their homework on their condition, small practices and big hospitals alike must coax them in with more care. And it is care and compassion, the hallmarks of medicine, which touches the skeptical nerve of today's scrutinizing client.



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Your credentials? After 25 years of receiving that marketing message, consumers assume it, and are more interested in your reputation for interacting with patients, which they can check out on the Internet. This is how you're being evaluated, because this is how consumers evaluate everything, from washing machines to shoulder surgery.

"The consumers are doing it in every other place in life and they don't see healthcare separated out as being as royal as it used to be, as elegant," says Andrea Eliscu, president of Medical Marketing Inc. in Orlando and a nationally noted author and expert on physician marketing. She says today's consumers are switching the way they make decisions because they are paying more for healthcare themselves, with employers shucking that burden.

"They feel it and they make a totally different selection. Yes, they want a qualified doctor. But you know what? If the doctor is young enough, most are all fellowship trained anyway. That's become an equalizer," explains Eliscu. "Now the consumer is thinking, 'Okay, if doctors are all trained the same, what is it about you? Is it your volume? Your service? The way you care for your patients? How you call a

patient back?'"

The shoulder patient will Google, "orthopedics Orlando rotator cuff," and will pull up a practice Web site. "Patients know what they are looking for," says Eliscu. "They want to know how other people just like them have responded. They look at blogs, look at videos, they want to see if the practice's Web pages and the social community part of the Web site look modern. They'll start equating how some of these communication tools look with how worldly the practice is, how attentive to the patient its people are."

CONVEY CARE AND COMPASSION

While a physician's credentials are important, conveying that your practice provides care and compassion also plays a large role in your marketing efforts.

Health Central's Director of Marketing and Public Information Officer, Dan Yates implemented a marketing strategy to help increase patient satisfaction ratings for the hospital. "Studies show that the most important satisfaction point for patients is how friendly and caring the staff and caregivers are when they are in the hospital," says Yates. "The biggest reason is that it institutes trust, a sense of safety,

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connection and personal relationship between patient and caregivers. It has to be cultivated. We realize that if someone has a bad experience, they're going to tell 10 people. If something good happens, they'll tell a couple of people. So we have to outweigh the bad experiences 10 to one. And they have to be fantastic experiences, not just okay."

Yates continues, "Be cautious that if you promise to be a caring, compassionate entity, you better deliver. With complete cooperation from the top down, Health Central constantly stresses to the staff to ask each patient multiple times—and especially right before the patient leaves—if anything unhappy happened during their stay. If so, we then initiate service recovery." Yates said by doing this, they soon saw a significant improvement in patient satisfaction. "The way we've done that is by offering personalized care, listening to patient concerns more, befriending them and gaining their trust," says Yates.

Health Central has marketed the new message, known as The New Red, for a few months now and it's starting to come back by word of mouth. "People are saying how great their experience at the hospital was, they know the names of nurses they want to stay in touch with. Every facility has similar technology and a qualified staff; what it comes down to is building relationships."

That goes for physicians also. "Doctors need a hospital that is responsive to their needs and that has a favorable reputation in the community that boosts

their own so that they can associate themselves with a greater entity that builds their business," says Yates.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

If you promise caring and compassion but don't follow through on the promise, it could present a huge detriment to your marketing efforts, whether you're a large hospital or a four-doc practice. "I'm telling physicians that if you want to manage expectations, you have to be careful about what you promise, and you have to successfully do what you promise," says Eliscu. She says today's situation is completely new compared to medical marketing in the past. What used to be new marketing points are now standard elements of operations.

"Physicians must be effective marketers in order to achieve business goals in today's economic climate," says AJ Beson, President and CEO of Beson4 Media Group. A physician's business goals, also affect their professional goals, which are often to be the caring and compassionate person they market themselves as. "The operational obstacles physicians are dealing with in this day and age, with electronic medical records, healthcare reform, having to bring in operational staff rather than nursing and clinical staff, isn't what these doctors got into it for," says Eliscu. "But if they can get really competent people on the operations side, I still see physicians who are dedicated, compassionate and healers at heart. Most of them went into this because deep down they had a calling. And what they want is to stop being dragged away from

their calling. But the responsibility falls on their shoulders so they have a foot in each camp."

It is reveille time in the marketing camp, where a wake up call has sounded that if you want your practice to evolve in a particular way, you must have a plan and implement it. "The biggest change that's happening is the way the consumer base wants to get information," explains Eliscu. "We're dealing with social communities these days, Facebook, Twitter, medical practices with Web sites, patient testimonials, video bios of doctors, press releases. There are so many opportunities to communicate, there's no reason that physicians have to look like salesmen out there."

Beson agrees. "We are seeing more and more practices position themselves as experts by providing comprehensive resources for their patients on their Web site. They also reach out to patients through social media networks like Facebook and Twitter. All facets of the practice are impacted by changing technology whether it is an appointment reminder sent by text or an informational e-newsletter emailed once a month, practices make a point to stay in front of their patients on a continual basis," he said.

As patients become savvy consumers and technology redefines the way we communicate, physicians need an effective marketing strategy. By communicating care and compassion, managing expectations and reaching consumers where they are, physicians can continue doing what they love and keep their practices thriving. **FD**