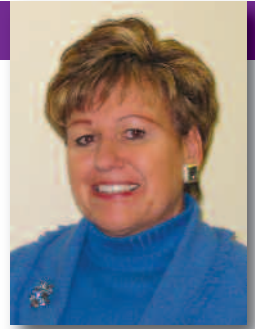


Roadmap to Success: Writing a Marketing Plan for Your Practice



By Debbe Childress Garrett, MBA

The need for marketing your medical practice has never been more important than it is today. There is more competition than ever before, and if you want to compete in today's medical arena, you must let people know about yourself and your services.

Many physicians still seem baffled by marketing. There are so many choices. "How do I know what I need? Where do I go for help?" But the question most frequently asked by physicians today is "How do I get started?" The answer: it all starts with a plan. Every medical practice, large or small, start-up or established, should have a written marketing plan. What makes this part even easier is that you can follow a formula to get started.

A marketing plan contains information about your practice, its services and products, objectives, strategies, budget, timeline and how you will track and evaluate its progress and success.

Step 1: Objectives of Your Plan

This step seems basic, but is one with which many physicians struggle. The purpose of this step is to set your goals. Do you want a specific type of patient? Are you marketing a new service? Do you want to change your payer mix? These goals should be measurable and certainly should be shared with everyone in the practice. A team cannot win if it does not even know how to score!

Step 2: Define Your Target Market

Who is your practice trying to reach? This will have a great bearing on how you implement your plan. Are you going after a certain demographic or geographic location? Once you have defined whom you are trying to reach, the ways to reach them will begin to become clearer to you.

Step 3: Define Your Competitive Advantages

This step can also be difficult for some physi-

cians. Marketing is basically telling people who you are, where you are, what you do, how to get there and most importantly why they should choose you.

This is the part of marketing most physicians will overlook and yet it is the most important. Why should your patients pass up your competitors and come to you? Try to avoid esoteric reasons like "We care" or "We put our patients first." For most consumers, this is a given. Do you have services or skills no one else has? Are your hours of service more flexible? Do you have a more convenient location? Do you accept more types of insurance? Do you take walk-ins? Be specific about what you have to offer.

Step 4: List Your Strategies

Now that you know what your objective is, whom you want to reach and what you have to offer, you have to begin to decide what methods you are going to use. Will you advertise, concentrate on professional referrals, develop a Web site, etc.? This is when you may need to enlist the help of a marketing consulting firm. Remember to concentrate on your target market and match your strategy of how to reach them based on where they are.

Step 5: Develop a Budget

If you are a start-up practice, you will need about \$10,000 to begin your marketing efforts. You may be able to get some services for free if you are affiliated with a specific hospital. An established practice should spend one-to-three percent of annual revenues on marketing. A practice offering retail services, such as cosmetic, plastic surgery or products, may need to spend more.

Step 6: Set a Timeline

Once you have your goals, strategy and budget, you need to set timelines for how you want to implement these strategies. If you are a

start-up practice, you may have to get all of them going all at once.

Step 7: Implementation

If I had to pick the biggest weakness in most marketing plans, it is this: after you get the plan laid out, you have to "just do it." Don't put it up on a shelf or take it home and leave it in your study. You must review each and every step with your staff. Then assign to a person responsible for each part. Even if you use an outside firm to develop materials, Web sites, etc., you still need to have someone on your staff responsible for making sure these things all get done.

Step 8: Tracking and Evaluation

At least every six months you should evaluate your plan. Are your objectives the same? Have there been any legal changes in your practice area? Are you tracking where your new patients are coming from? How much is it costing you per new patient based on your marketing expenditures?

Marketing can be either an investment or an expense. What makes the difference is having and following a plan. After all, just like on any other journey, you have to know where you are going, and you need to have a road map to get there! ■

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