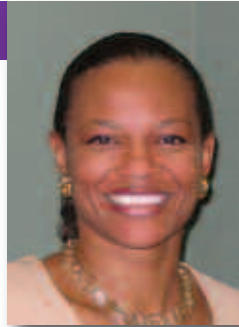
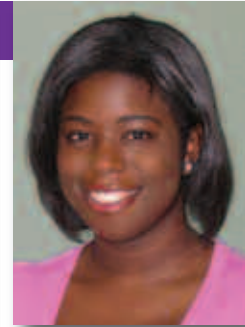


Using Relationship Marketing To Grow Your Specialty Practice



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It is essential for the specialist physician to nurture relationships with referring doctors. There are a number of steps the specialist can take to develop, grow and maintain steady referrals.

Have your staff participate in outreach and diplomacy. Have your front desk staffer visit the offices of the referring doctor and introduce her or him. This will attach a smiling face with a name, create an opportunity for those staffers to “bond” with one another and improve the likelihood that calls from your office will be received enthusiastically and cheerfully. Your staffer may even bring a treat, courtesy of your practice, which creates another opportunity for your staffer to follow up a few days later (i.e., “How did the staff like the brownies?”).

During that follow-up call, your staffer may ask if that doctor has seen any patients recently with the problem you treat. If so, the staffer can remind them you are well-qualified and eager to care for patients with that condition, and that your office will be able to get them in quickly. Your staffer should project friendliness and professionalism, demonstrating that your office would be very pleasant, respectful and accommodating to their patients.

Make an effort to personally field a call from a referring doctor. Ask how you can help her or him and express that you will see the patient as quickly as possible. At the conclusion of that patient encounter, call the referring doctor personally to discuss your evaluation. He or she will remember your personal care and attention.

Court your patients. You may not realize it, but current patients are the single largest referral source to your practice and their referrals are completely free! Former patients

are not qualified clinically to make referrals, but they base their referrals on how they feel about their patient experience. Spend your time and money ensuring that the service you deliver to patients doesn’t just produce satisfaction, but also creates patient advocacy. Always address patients by name, try to recall personal details about them, be respectful of their time, and send a birthday or holiday card from your staff. True patient advocates not only return to you for their next healthcare need, but rave to others about you.

Work your contracts. In group practices, be sure that your practice is contracted with the same insurance companies as the referring physician, so only qualified patients are referred to you. If your practice handles workers’ compensation, a strategy to target large employers (who may self-insure) or networks of employers may generate a workers’ compensation contract for your practice. You may also develop relationships with adjusters, and consider offering to speak at the regional Adjusters’ Association meeting to build rapport and awareness of your expertise with those professionals.

It is also important to periodically review your insurance contracts to be sure they are still profitable for your practice. Plans that prove to be unprofitable for the practice should be renegotiated or eliminated.

Be available. There are four major areas of a specialty practice amenable to marketing: price, ability, affability, and availability. The hardest aspect to market is price because other providers (especially physician extenders) can charge less than you do. You can, however, control the other three aspects. If you have a sub-specialty (e.g., pediatric spine surgery), your ability may already be distinguished from other physicians. The pleasant manner in which you and your staff interact

with patients demonstrates affability. The final and easiest aspect of a practice to market is availability, which you may demonstrate by offering evening or weekend clinic hours, or accepting ER call.

Be sensitive to the biases of other physicians. A marketing plan to develop and grow referrals from other physicians should also consider the special interests of different groups. Hospital-employed physicians, for example, may sense resentment from independent private practitioners who view them as already having a “sweet deal” with guaranteed income. These independent physicians often prefer to support fellow independent providers. It is difficult to change that bias, so you may choose to dedicate little or no marketing dollars to this segment, opting instead to market your practice directly to the patient population.

Relationships will always drive physician referral patterns. Interpersonal relationships are relatively inexpensive to develop and are usually more enduring. Take the time to build rapport, reach out to other doctors and to your patients, remain committed to excellence, and your referrals are sure to grow steadily over time. +

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