

The Most Powerful Form of Marketing: Excellent Service

By Suzanne Boswell

This article may be used as basis of a team meeting. There are roleplay scenarios at the close of the article to help team members recognize and seize opportunities.

"How should we market the practice? Will we get a return on our investment? What will our patients think about our advertising?" There are concerns we've heard from practitioners and there are concerns we've heard from patients. Do any of these sound familiar to you?

THE PRACTICE POSITION:

- I feel uncomfortable actively promoting treatment
- It's distasteful to market the practice through external advertising
- We should leave it up to the patient to initiate inquiries
- We shouldn't harass the patient about sending us referrals
- Why shouldn't excellent results be enough?

THE PATIENT POSITION:

- I don't want to get a sales pitch when I'm in the office
- I don't want them to push treatments
- I'll refer them if the opportunity arises, but I'd feel awkward if the practice pushed me for referrals
- I don't like feeling "marketed to"!

There is decided discomfort for many practices in relation to marketing. Likewise, patients don't want to be the target of aggressive marketing. Some might say that internal marketing is acceptable when handled tastefully, but that external marketing is taboo. There are endless opinions on this. But two points are clear. For a practice to grow:

- (1) Any form of marketing must be patient-friendly
- (2) You must at least market internally

IS IT MARKETING OR IS IT CUSTOMER SERVICE?

When I was writing the book, **The Mystery Patient's Guide to Gaining & Retaining Patients**, I repeatedly experienced a philosophical dilemma. I found myself struggling with a topic to be addressed, but unsure whether it should be put in the chapter on marketing, or the chapter on customer service. It became clear to me through this process that marketing and service are inextricably entwined. Excellent customer service IS marketing. Great customer service is marketing in the most effective and patient-friendly manner. This is also the type of marketing that the patient is most comfortable with. It's non-aggressive, it's patient-friendly and it's ethical.

PATIENTS' PLATINUM PRIZE FOR MARKETING: CONFIDENT, CARING STAFF

Patients said it best: when it comes to effective marketing, nothing compares to confident, caring staff members. In an ongoing series of focus groups we conducted with patients on marketing, they consistently remarked that the most powerful marketing comes from a highly evolved staff - one that believes in the practice. No websites, brochures, on-hold tapes or collateral materials can hold a candle to what the staff says about the practice.

Staff provides the foundation for an effective marketing program. Imagine an office that has impressive external advertising, a great website and a beautiful print collateral package. Now imagine how patients feel when they call the office or arrive for their first appointment to find that the team doesn't meet expectations based on the marketing. Marketing without a solid foundation can be perceived by patients as manipulative. Trust is blown out the window! Before spending time and money on materials, be sure your team can support your efforts! Likewise, seizing opportunities without providing genuine value to the patient can be perceived as purely opportunistic. There must be a win-win balance.

The team that truly believes in the practice will be the most effective in promoting in a patient-friendly manner. The highly evolved team has gone beyond "working" at promoting the practice. Their belief in the practice is so strong that they can put effort into focusing more on the patient issues. They can think about the patient needs first and then easily relate solutions that are found within the practice. The highly evolved team is one that:

- has strong belief in the ethics of the practice
- has strong belief in the clinical skills of all practitioners
- genuinely respects other members of the team
- truly cares about the patients - as individuals
- has empathy for patients
- communicates in an open, honest and sincere manner
- understands their own responsibilities in the overall marketing plan
- recognizes the power of providing top quality service

When your team comes together with this kind of belief and strength, internal marketing is far easier and naturally overlaps with excellent customer service.

CARPE DIEM - SEIZE THE DAY

Every day patients provide you with a myriad of opportunities for you to promote your practice in a patient-friendly manner. The keys are:

- (1) Recognize the opportunity.
- (2) Place yourself in the patient's position and rethink the opportunity to meet the needs of the patient first.
- (3) Seize the opportunity in a patient-friendly manner

For the practice, the toughest of these three steps may be #2. It's very difficult to step outside yourself and see an issue from the patient's point of view. In doing this it's crucial that the patient understand that you want to be of service, provide valuable information or meet their specific needs. Having empathy for the patient is a crucial part of this.

Empathy means understanding how the patient might feel, not necessarily feeling what the patient feels. For example, to be empathetic you can understand patient anger without feeling anger and without agreeing with the patient.

Here are some examples of marketing opportunities that might arise in your office. Review these scenarios with the team. Consider how patients might feel if given the different answers as listed. If you were the patient how would you like to have these situations handled? Every one of these scenarios offers patient-friendly ways to market the practice - which do you think are the most patient-friendly?

Role Plays Scenarios

ON THE TELEPHONE - Patient says: "I just moved in the neighborhood and saw your sign. I've been thinking of getting braces, would you tell me something about the doctor?"

RECEPTIONIST SAYS:

- (a) "He graduated from UNC in 1985. He's been in practice at this location all this time - did you want to make an appointment for a consultation?"
- (b) "She's very gentle and is very caring. She attends a lot of continuing education seminars to stay up-to date. Our patients just love her and so does all the staff!"
- (c) "What kind of information would be the most helpful to you? Was there a specific area of interest or concern you had?"

KEY POINT: Gently probing the patient for more specifics indicates an interest in patient needs, increases patient understanding and will aid the staff member in providing meaningful information to the patient. This is a KEY question because the answer can provide insights on what is important to the patient and enables the staff member to market the practice in a patient-friendly manner. Patients in our focus groups consistently affirm that when staff asks appropriate questions indicating interest in the patient, the practice is perceived as a caring one.

AT FRONT DESK - Patient says: "No, I can't schedule for that date, my sister's moving into town and I'll be helping her move into her new house that week."

RECEPTIONIST SAYS:

- (a) "How about the 16th, is that better? - (appointment is made) - Great, we'll see you then."
- (b) "What date would be best for you?" – (appointment is made) - Great, we'll see you then."
- (c) "Would you prefer to do it before that week or after her move? (appointment is made) Terrific. That is great that your sister will be moving here! And we'd love to be of help to your sister and her family too!

KEY POINT: After scheduling the appointment, the staff member can ask about the sister and encourage a referral in a low-key, patient-friendly manner. (THEN put a note in her records so it is a point of conversation at the next appointment. This is a part of rapport-building.) Patients feel more "connected" to the practice when the practice indicates interest in them and in their families.

IN TREATMENT ROOM WITH THE ASSISTANT - Patient says: "Sometimes I feel so stupid, I know the doctor just explained the next step of my treatment, but I don't really understand it."

ASSISTANT SAYS:

- (a) "Well, the doctor did use a lot of technical words. Let me explain what he meant."
- (b) "What didn't you understand and I'll explain it further for you?"
- (c) "Please don't feel uncomfortable about that. I'm glad you told me - it often helps to hear it put another way. Here's why the next step is so important and how it will help you."

KEY POINT: Patients often "open up" to staff members more quickly than to the doctor. Put the patient at ease about having asked the question and validate the importance for understanding. Explain the treatment using an approach that is in sync and compatible with the communication and behavioral style of the patient. What you say can have a significant influence on the patient's likelihood of complying with treatment. Before the patient leaves the chair, encourage any further questions to ensure comprehension.

THE VEILED OPPORTUNITIES

Every day with every patient there are veiled opportunities to market your practice and instill confidence in the patient for your practice. Consider what variables are available to you and how you might seize those opportunities. The situations that occur daily are ideal opportunities to brainstorm with your team members ... and to consider how your responses can influence your patients and lead to referrals!

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