



Promote Your Practice with Creative Approaches

Build your reputation in the community and reach out to current and potential patients with these easy-to-implement strategies.

Physicians in general have the dubious distinction of being bad business people. Many of us could have easily pursued careers in business or finance but chose medicine because that's where our interests directed us. Once in medical school, we did not have access to business training. Yet experience reveals that a medical practice is very much a business and must be run as such. One element of the business of medicine that often goes overlooked (if not purposely eschewed) is practice promotion. Many physicians convince themselves they don't need to market their practices, when in reality, the dermatologist should actively seek opportunities to promote his or her practice and our specialty. It isn't hard to do, and it doesn't require much spending—especially if you take advantage of unusual approaches to practice promotion.

Guiding Principles

Before describing some of the strategies I have found effective for promoting my practice and the dermatology specialty, it is

important to outline two guiding principles of practice promotion. First, every practice must diligently track and monitor the results of its marketing efforts to gauge their efficacy. Second, you must be flexible; remain open to redirecting efforts away from ineffective tactics to new and creative ones.

To effectively track marketing, ascertain what drew each new patient to the practice. Before even scheduling an appointment for a new patient, our receptionist asks the caller how he or she learned about our practice. This is important data that will guide future promotions. Generally, I consider a three-to-one return on investment worthwhile. Therefore, if I find that a particular strategy consistently fails to meet that target, I reconsider. For example, when I first started my practice, I purchased a full-page, full-color ad in the yellow pages. This ad drew patients initially, but I soon found that the return dwindled to two-to-one and then even lower. I knew that it was time to cut back on the ad and redirect some of the money to something potentially more effective.

Besides helping you determine the efficacy of your promotions, data help you better communicate with vendors and oth-



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ers who work with you on promotions. For example, when I told the district sales manager that I was going to significantly cut down my yellow page presence, he pressed hard to keep the ad. He even involved his regional manager. Armed with data, I justified my decision to both of them and was able to negotiate a rate for a smaller ad that more fairly reflected its value to my practice.

Flexibility and creativity go hand-in-hand with monitoring. You must consistently evaluate the efficacy of promotions and be willing and able to redirect efforts as needed. Obviously you must allow ample trial time to demonstrate benefit before you abandon a tactic, but if you're not seeing any benefit within a few months, consider alternative options. Be vigilant for new and creative ways to promote your practice. Consider strategies that you see in use at other medical practices and other service-based businesses.

By Charles E. Crutchfield III, MD

Promoting Your Practice

A Winning Website

While the majority of practices today seem to have websites, few reap maximum benefit from their web presence because their sites are sub-par. A truly worthwhile website must be user-friendly, professional looking, and content rich.

A website that is not user-friendly is not worth having. I went to great pains to ensure that my practice site was easy to navigate. Test your site yourself and recruit others (staff, friends, family members) to test, as well. Ensure that patients will easily find key information and be able to navigate from one page to the next. Also be certain that your contact information, including office phone number and address, are easy to locate from any page. You want it to be easy for the patient to contact the office if he or she can't find the answer to their question or they want to schedule an appointment.

The design must obviously enhance user-friendliness. Have a polished, professional look. Your website is a representation

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of you and your practice. More importantly, it may provide some individuals their first impression of you and your practice. Therefore, you want the “look” of your site to convey dedication to high standards, attention to detail, thoroughness, and knowledge. The implication is that you take a similarly thorough and professional approach to patient care.

The site should be rich in content and updated frequently. Provide a description of your philosophy on patient care and treatment style. Patients will look for and appreciate this information. This is in addition to updates about practice updates and new products and procedures. Provide educational materials. Update information frequently; this gives patients a reason to return to the site. We update our website nearly every day. At a minimum, practices should update their sites weekly. It further demonstrates your attention to detail and your dedication to truly provide a service to patients.

High-quality, before and after photos from among your own patients should accompany any description of a procedure or service.

Publish an e-Newsletter

The appearance and content of your newsletter will depend on your personal preferences and your communication goals. The newsletter should reflect your style and patient care philosophy. Just as with the website, you should emphasize a user-friendly, professional-looking design. Seek input from professional designers, web publishers, and even writers if necessary. I am fortunate that one of my staff members has a background in journalism that has proven immensely helpful. These services need not be overly costly. In fact, investing too much time or energy in the project diminishes its bottom-line value to your practice.

While print newsletters sent via traditional mail are still popular and an option to consider, e-newsletters represent a significantly less expensive but effective option. Printed newsletters on average cost about \$1.25 each to print and mail. Considering the size of your patient base and the frequency of mailings, costs quickly add up. A printed newsletter mailed to 10,000 patients on a quarterly basis would cost \$12,500 per installment, \$50,000 for the year!

By contrast, costs associated with producing and sending an e-newsletter are minimal, especially once the initial design is complete. And you can publish as frequently as you wish without incrementally increasing costs. My practice just launched a monthly publication schedule.

I found it best to establish a standard format for the newsletter that consists of recurring “departments,” much as you would find in a magazine (techies call it an “e-zine” format). There are “departments” for reporting practice news; new services, procedures, or products; updates about me and the staff; and general skin health and skin care topics. My goal is to provide 50 percent dermatology-specific content. The remainder of the material includes non-practice and even non-dermatology tidbits, such as a monthly riddle, weird medical stories, fun-facts, etc. If I find a website that I think patients may find useful, I highlight it, as well. For example, I recently spotlighted a website that finds the best gasoline prices in a neighborhood. I feel these nuggets make the newsletter worthwhile and more fun to read for patients. There is something for everyone in each installment. My website, with the newsletter on-line is: www.crutchfielddermatology.com.

Promoting Your Practice

Acquiring sufficient content for a monthly newsletter may seem like a daunting task, but there are easy ways to uncover and save information that your patients will enjoy reading. One trick is to set news alerts in Google search. Every time a story posts that relates to my pre-set filters—such as dermatology, “weird medicine,” etc.—I get a copy of the article delivered to me. My staff compiles these for a rich bank of stories and information to incorporate into the newsletter.

Should you choose to pursue a print newsletter, contracting with a company that handles all aspects of production and mailing for medical practices may streamline the process for you or your in-office contact and may offer a more competitive cost than contracting with multiple vendors. However, before signing a contract, be certain that the company offers exclusivity. You don’t want another area physician to purchase and send essentially the same newsletter to their patients.

Use Your Own Photos

I cannot overstate the importance of using your own before and after photos in everything you publish. Whether on the website, newsletter, advertisements, or handouts, include actual before and after photos of your own patients. Photos influence a patient’s decision whether or not to pursue a certain procedure.

If you depend solely on photos provided by device and product marketers, you run the risk of using images that other area dermatologists, plastic surgeons, and even GPs and Ob/Gyns may be using. Patients can and will recognize these over-used photos. Patients have commented that they specifically came to me because my photos were unique; they demonstrated that I had experience, and they showed I could achieve good results.

To offer maximum benefit, photos must be of good quality. If you are not adept at taking good photos, invest the time and resources into acquiring good (not necessarily expensive) photographic equipment and training.

Set Yourself Apart

Look for ways you can make your practice more attractive or convenient for patients. Improving the patient’s overall perception of your practice and their experience potentially translates into increased word-of-mouth promotion. Additionally, truly creative ideas may yield unexpected buzz for your practice.

Consider my recent experience establishing the first Wi-Fi (wireless fidelity internet access) dermatology office in my area—and, I believe, the second in the country. While visiting a coffee shop, I noticed how many customers were using the wireless Internet connection to work on their laptops. Considering that patients might appreciate the ability to use the Internet while waiting in my reception area, I did research with my IT staff and determined that for about \$1,000, I could establish Wi-Fi capabilities in the office. Patients waiting to be

seen are distracted by their computers, so their wait seems shorter. And if I happen to run behind schedule, they don’t feel like they’re “wasting time” in the reception area reading gossip magazines. The response has been phenomenal.

At the recommendation of a patient impressed by the Wi-Fi feature, we posted a press-release announcing our new wireless status. Local and national media contacted us in response to the press release, leading to coverage of my practice in the news.

Regardless of any extra amenities you offer patients, ensure that your office design is welcoming and attractive. Trust professionals rather than relying on your own sense of style or that of a spouse or friends. Update frequently. We just had new carpeting installed and recovered the chairs in the reception area. It was relatively inexpensive to do, but it keeps the office looking fresh. Finally, we have fresh flowers delivered from a leading area florist every week. It’s a small touch that adds freshness and cheeriness and makes patients feel welcome.

Support the Community

As your profile in the community builds, you may be invited to a growing number of community events. Your participation in these could introduce you to new patients, land you on the evening newscast, or otherwise generate promotion, but most likely you’ll find these events do not drive patients to the office. Still, you should participate whenever possible. When we are invited to a community event, someone from my staff attends. It is an easy way for us to give back to the community and show our support for it.

I also respond favorably to most reasonable requests for community sponsorships. For example, the local high school may invite you to sponsor their academic calendar. For a donation of a couple hundred dollars they print a small ad on the calendar. This may not bring in a single patient, but it demonstrates your support of the community. If nothing else, your participation may reinforce an established patient’s favorable perception of you and your practice.

Support the Specialty

As part of the AAD’s “Play it Smart in the Sun” campaign in conjunction with Major League Baseball, I have had the privilege of working with the Minnesota Twins to provide skin exams. This is a one-day annual event intended to raise public awareness about skin cancer, sun protection, and early detection. Due to the nature of the event, there really is no opportunity for personal promotion. However, I feel my participation is immensely important and worthwhile.

I also strongly support “Camp Discovery,” a camp for children with skin diseases, associated with the AAD. I co-authored a textbook of dermatology and also sell (my own) paintings, and I donate all my proceeds from both to the

Just In: Tips on Dealing with the Media

Getting involved with local media can help raise your profile and gain publicity for your practice, but know that developing a relationship with local media can be challenging and requires persistence. Recognize that your relationship with the media is based on an inherent give-and-take.

News outlets are hungry machines. They have lots of space to fill, and when they are done, they have to start all over again for the next edition. As such, reporters develop a stable of experts who can provide them ideas for stories or provide commentary for stories in development. As a dermatologist, you could easily offer suggestions on hot topics in the field or make yourself available to address medical or cosmetic advancements.

At the same time, however, newspapers and other publications rely on paid advertisements for profit. They may be skeptical of a physician they suspect is using them for free publicity.

Developing a good relationship with the media involves striking a balance. Introduce yourself to local reporters/editors by forwarding an introductory letter, a copy of your CV, and a list of interests. Then, on a fairly regular basis, send ideas for stories that are of interest to the general readership and are not simply promotional for you or your practice. For example, this month you could contact local media to remind them that it is Skin Cancer Awareness month and recommend a story on early detection of skin cancer or sun safety strategies for children.

Media won't respond positively to all recommendations, but if you continue to provide worthwhile story ideas, they may eventually pursue some and will turn to you for comment. Over time, you may emerge as a leading source for them.

Respond to any media requests in a timely fashion; assume the reporter is on a tight deadline and respond ASAP. Instruct staff to handle media requests in a prompt manner and make you aware of them quickly. If you consistently fail to respond or respond slowly, reporters will stop contacting you in favor of other more responsive physicians.

camp. I also send several patients every year to the camp, and encourage medical students interested in dermatology to volunteer as camp counselors. The positive responses I've received from the patient-campers and medical student-counselors have been rewarding beyond words. Taking part in programs such as this helps to support our specialty and the AAD as an organization, which I believe is critical. It also advances patient education, which I know is important. Given so many social/economic/political factors confronting physicians in general and dermatologists in particular, maintaining a strong, respected representative organization is critical.

Whenever you are able to support the AAD as well as your local dermatology society or medical organizations, consider doing so. You can always include a blurb in your newsletter.

Give Thanks

I always send a personalized note of thanks to each new cos-

metic patient as well as to patients who refer patients to me. I express my appreciation of patients' confidence in me. It takes just a bit of time and is inexpensive, yet patients will appreciate the time you take.

Implement, Track, Evaluate, and Refocus

Practice promotion is increasingly important for dermatology practices, whether in big cities or smaller communities, whether delivering strictly medical care or a mix of medical and cosmetic services. With competition on all fronts from outside our specialty, dermatologists must find creative ways to promote themselves and our specialty. Practice promotion need not be costly, nor must it be overly time-consuming. Think creatively about the best ways to reach current and potential patients and draw them to your practice. Success requires that the practice track the effects of each new strategy, evaluate benefits, make informed decisions, and consider new opportunities. 