Increase the Buzz for Your Practice

Learn how to tune into and turn up the buzz on your dermatology practice.

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Patients want their doctor to be "tops in the field" and on the leading edge of medicine. This is especially true of cosmetic dermatology patients, who have significant freedom in physician selection.

Since they are paying out-of-pocket—in some cases for high-priced procedures—they are entitled to "the best." Without doubt, the quality of care you provide, the results patients see, and the treatment they receive from you and your staff ultimately determine a patient's assessment of your skill and expertise. However, you can reinforce a positive assessment by existing patients and draw new patients by positioning your practice as an area leader in the procedures and services you perform.

Create Your Own Buzz

If you want to persuade current and potential patients that you are a leader in the field, then you must be one. You should always be looking for ways to enhance your practice and its status. You can't operate in a vacuum. The "if you build it they will come" philosophy does not apply. If you make an enhancement, you must actively inform patients and potential patients about what is going on in the practice.

There are three main areas to consider: services, events, honors/accomplishments.

Services. Whether your focus is primarily medical or cosmetic, keep abreast of new interventions and opportunities and take advantage of those that make sense for you and your practice. Then spread the word. Your practice newsletter (or e-newsletter) is a great place to start. If warranted, you might even consider a specific letter (or e-mail) to your existing patients announcing the new offering.

Be sure to update your website with a prominent announcement that you now provide a particular service, and be sure to add that procedure to your menu of services. When individuals Google your town's name and that service, your website better come up or else you'll lose patients. This goes for every service you offer.

When a brand new or high-interest product/service comes out don't expect the mainstream media hype alone to bring patients to your door. Take advantage of that hype. When a company earns approval for a product or service, you'll see coverage on the Web, on TV, and in magazines and newspapers. Often these companies offer physician finders and other useful Web and phone tools that can benefit us in practice, but even these don't maximize your impact. Instead, make the news your own. Place a statement on your website: "Dr. Dermatologist proudly announces that he offers...". Consider contacting local media offering to be a source for their coverage.

We know that patient/public interest can quickly wane, but you can revive interest in services or procedures with updates on your website and in newsletters. Perhaps you've simply updated your laser system, maybe a new study confirms the efficacy of an agent, or suppose you've treated your 100th patient. Why not include a blurb that keeps the product/service fresh in patients' minds and reminds them of your expertise and skill?

Events. There are two primary types of events: those you create and those you are invited by others to participate in. Each may provide an opportunity to recruit new patients, serve existing patients, and gain some external coverage of your practice.

Practice-created programs include educational sessions and seminars or practice "open-houses" designed to introduce your practice or a new service or procedure to interested individuals. The most effective way to advertise these events is through the practice, though you might consider cost-effective advertising opportunities, such as community newspapers and community information boards at appropriate venues. Always encourage patients to tell their friends and acquaintances and emphasize opportunities to "bring a friend." Inform local media of upcoming events. They probably won't cover the seminar. But a reporter might develop a story idea out of the topics you propose to cover.

External events take numerous forms. Many colleagues and consultants have advocated participation in community health fairs as a way to promote your practice. You gain exposure to potential new patients, you raise the profile of your practice, you increase goodwill among existing patients, and you never know when the local paper or television station might show up to cover the event. You might also agree to speak at a local school (Sun safety is a good topic), at a civic event, or another club or group meeting.

I believe participation in community events is a potentially good idea but urge dermatologists to thoughtfully consider how to best participate in various events. A more intimate educational venue may be an ideal setting for you to personally appear to speak to the crowd. I had the opportunity to participate in a very successful venture at Mall of America in January. Mom-Camp drew 100 women and involved a total of five panelists, including me. As someone who enjoys educating, I found the event quite pleasant and felt it was a true benefit to participants. Minnesota Monthly, one of the primary sponsors, provided a great deal of coverage before and after the event, providing me additional exposure.

For large or exhibition-type events, having a staff presence may be wise. A well-prepared delegate for the practice can provide information, answer basic questions, and generally
Requirements for Marketing Success

There are certain key marketing tools essential to every practice.

Data Capture. You must capture demographic information, including mailing address and e-mail addresses for every patient and must update that information at every visit. Such information will be important for many of your internal marketing initiatives, including your newsletter or e-newsletter and patient e-mails.

Effective Website. Every practice should have a user-friendly, informative website that is professional looking, easy to navigate, and provides key information about the practice, services, and the physician(s).

Quality Newsletter. Perhaps the most effective tool for internal marketing is an informative practice newsletter. An e-newsletter may represent a more cost-effective option that provides fewer limitations on total content. Beyond information about the practice, include relevant medical content and other information of interest to patients. Keep it fresh, engaging, and professional looking. Hire a designer if needed.

Assessment and Readjustment. Always assess the efficacy of your marketing endeavors and be ready and willing to change course when needed. Ask every patient how he or she heard about your practice so that you can determine which marketing efforts worked and which are falling short.

For more on these elements of successful marketing, see my article in the May 2006 issue of Practical Dermatology, available online at practicaldermatology.com.

make a good impression for your practice. The practice will benefit from the exposure, but you won’t have to cancel a clinic day.

Advertise your coming participation in events and then report back about your participation.

Honors and Accomplishments. Even patients who already think very highly of you and your medical skill will be pleased to hear that others have recognized your accomplishments. Patients like to know that “their” doctor is a leader in the field. Don’t hesitate to share your successes with patients and the community. If a paper has been received for publication, you’ve been invited to speak at a conference, or you’ve participated in the pivotal trials for a new therapy or indication, patients ought to know. If you’ve commented for an article, either in the medical literature or the lay press, tell patients. Include a link to the article on your website, if possible.

Sometimes we are fortunate enough to be recognized by our peers or our patients for our accomplishments. Share these moments with patients. I have had the honor to be named a “Top Dermatologist” by Minneapolis-St. Paul magazine in each of its last four rankings. I have included this honor on my website and in patient communications. This also gives me an opportunity to recognize the staff who are so integral to the success of the practice and this ranking. Simply being named is a privilege with potential marketing benefits, as thousands of local residents read the magazine. I have received similar recognition from Minnesota Monthly magazine and was named a “Top Doctor in America,” both of which I shared with patients through the e-newsletter and website.

Buzz from the Community

You shouldn’t do all the work of promoting your practice on your own. Let others in the community help.

Physician Referrals. Referrals from local physicians can significantly bolster a practice, while lack of referrals can obviously hurt. There are numerous ways to develop relationships with local physicians. I have dedicated a significant portion of my practice website to supporting fellow physicians. Much of the information is intended for my dermatology colleagues across the country, but I believe the materials offered under the “For Healthcare Providers” tab helps build rapport with other doctors, too. I also participate in educational seminars for family care doctors in my area. Not only is this a good way to serve colleagues; it’s a great way to network.
Finally, I publish an electronic “case-of-the-month” for my colleagues. It’s a fun and quick way to share some diagnostic and treatment pearls with my colleagues on common yet challenging dermatologic cases. It’s received rave reviews.

**Local Media.** From local newspapers to radio stations to television networks, every time your name or the name of your practice is mentioned, thousands—probably hundreds of thousands—of people are exposed to you. These avenues literally bring you into people’s homes and cars. Introduce yourself to local media. Identify the health beat reporter. Send him or her a letter of introduction, a brief bio, a description of your areas of expertise, and key contact information. If you have a timely story idea, share that as well. Stay in touch through the year by sending occasional story ideas. For example, if you know a new product is due for approval/release in the coming week, send an e-mail to let them know you are available for comment. If you have experience with the product, that’s even better. Look for seasonal “hooks,” as well. You could suggest a story tied into Skin Cancer Awareness month (May) or Psoriasis Awareness month (August).

Because these media outlets rely on advertising for revenue, they may rely primarily on physicians who advertise to serve as sources, but there will certainly be opportunities for non-advertisers, too.

In this age of satellite radio, don’t forget about your local stations. Daytime talk shows could be hungry for guests, and they almost always tap into what’s “hot” in pop culture right now, including cosmetic interventions. Especially if previous discussion has focused on a new intervention or a popular treatment, offer to comment and “set the facts straight.” I’ve even provided treatments to radio hosts on-air.

**Community Support.** If the community supports you, you should support the community. Consider sponsorship opportunities, including those with less conventional programs. Local youth and adult sports leagues often seek financial support in exchange for publicizing sponsors’ names on shirts, pamphlets, and even mini-billboards. Schools and churches often sell sponsorships of calendars, newsletters, and event programs. These tend to be relatively low cost with decent exposure. Even if such sponsorships draw no new patients, you’ll benefit from the positive image reflected to current patients.

**Make it Your Mission**

Numerous articles have advocated the development of a practice mission statement. These can take various forms, and sometimes there is an internal mission statement and a second mission statement reflected to the public. Devise a mission statement that meaningfully reflects your patient care philosophy and your goals and captures the interest and attention of patients. Use the right “buzz words” to pique patients’ interest while accurately and sincerely expressing your objectives. Publicize your mission statement—it’s at the top of my practice homepage. Then live up to it.

The mission statement sets patients’ expectations for your practice. When you meet or exceed those expectations, patients will be both satisfied and grateful. They may even wind up using terminology similar to that in the mission statement to describe their experience to others (potential patients).

For the practice, the mission statement sets a bar. Every member of the practice knows the minimum he or she must do to fulfill the mission, effectively serve the patient, and develop loyal, satisfied patients.

**Carefully Consider Marketing Partnerships**

I recently wrote about what I have termed “Trojan Horse Marketing” by some pharmaceutical companies (May 2007, p. 60). Dermatologists must carefully assess any marketing partnerships—even with well-known pharmaceutical companies—before agreeing to participate. I discovered well into my participation in one program that all of the demographic data my staff was capturing would not be shared with me; the marketer was interested only in enriching their own database. Even after I opted out of the program, the marketer sent an e-mail to my patients, announcing that they and I were pleased to announce the release of their new product. I had not approved this message, nor was I informed about it prior to its publication. Worse, the announcement included a coupon good at any provider.

Before agreeing to participate in any marketing program (most of them can be valuable to dermatologists), determine all the logistics. Ensure that you will receive copies of all demographic information about your patients. Establish that the company will send no communication to patients as if from you. Make certain that you will have the opportunity to review and approve or reject all co-marketing communication prior to its distribution. Also, be sure any coupons or discounts will be good only at your practice.

These steps will assure that your practice is protected and that you benefit from the marketing relationship in equal proportion to the manufacturer.

**Tune in, Turn it Up**

Hopefully your practice already has some buzz. Tune in to what patients are saying and to what patients are looking for. Then identify how your practice can meet those needs and exceed expectations. Taking pro-active steps to keep patients and non-patients informed about your practice is the best way to turn up the buzz. There are many effective and inexpensive ways to spread the word about your practice. Creativity and persistence are key.