

Common Sense Marketing and Driving Referrals

Success is ultimately dependent on customer service.

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Their “secrets” often include operational policies and procedures that the practice carefully developed and has followed consistently with good results. But

fully assigned roles. One practice improves productivity with “advance access” scheduling, whereas another one improves patient flow with “multi-lane” services.

When we write about “best-run medical practices,” we’re talking about the practices that excel in more than one of these four measurable areas:

- Profitability and cost control;
- Efficiency and productivity;
- Revenue cycle measures (accounts receivable performance); and
- Patient satisfaction.

they often vary from practice to practice. One group solves its telephone problems with a slick, well-managed technological solution, whereas another office fixes it with beefed-up training and care-

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Knowing What to Steal

Different practice settings obviously benefit from different solutions. The operational strategy that proves to be a home run in one practice may produce a disappointing base hit (or strikeout) at your place. Stealing someone else’s idea doesn’t always produce the same great results. We once studied under a professor who liked to say, “It does take a thief—but you have to know what to steal.” Our esteemed professor explained that stealing a single idea can yield very limited results at best, but if you can emulate the thought processes and principles that produced the idea, you can benefit indefinitely. It’s a lot like that old saying: “Give a man a fish...”

Going Deeper

As you read Henley’s writings about medical practice promotion, several themes begin to emerge. You’ll soon get the impression that Henley thinks about marketing almost constantly. It seems clear that

Continued on page 148



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Referrals (from page 147)

even when he's busy treating patients and managing his business, he remains consciously aware of the image he and his staff present to the public eye.

Philosophers sometimes talk about an individual's (or a whole culture's) world view, that is, the lens through which he or she filters all perception. It's the point of view that defines a person's concept of truth and reality; it shapes his or her values, ethics, emotions, and beliefs. We believe that Henley has developed and nurtured a business worldview that interprets nearly everything through the lens of marketing and public relations.

Lest that make you feel uncomfortable, we hasten to explain that "marketing and public relations" in the medical practice shouldn't necessarily invoke images of smarmy used car salesmen or carnival barkers obnoxiously hawking their wares to passers-by! Marketing a medical practice can be, should be, a natural part of fulfilling your role as a community asset. As Henley says, "If you know deep down that you are the best at what you do, spend the most energy and time with your patients, provide excellent service and myriad other benefits for patients, why are you keeping it a secret?"¹

He recognizes that even mediocre and incompetent physicians can (and will) attract patients with slick advertising and empty promises. Quality doctors who think they can simply rely on word of mouth or on "some kind of mystical, osmotic process to bring patients in the door" are doing their communities a great disservice. They are surrendering patients to questionable or substandard care by withholding their own voices from the marketplace. If you want to "steal" something from Henley, don't just settle for the stuff he gives away on his website. Even though he offers many valuable ideas, techniques, and strategies for improving your practice marketing plan, you could revolutionize your practice's market effectiveness by adopting his business world view.

Four Components

Don't fool yourself. Providing a smooth-running business operation and top-notch clinical care won't guarantee your practice will grow sufficiently in a competitive environment. Patient satisfaction and good clinical outcomes won't always result in glowing testimonials and referrals from family members. And in some markets where the competition is fierce, the "other guy" who invests in market branding will siphon off more patients than you'd guess. So how do you adjust your business worldview? It's a matter of self-discipline and athlete-like mental training. Making a conscious effort will result in new patterns and habits that eventual-

tients feel you have all the time in the world for each of them?

Do your staff, office decor, and maintenance support the impression that you care about patients' comfort and convenience? Do your scheduling and bill-paying policies say, "We care about you"? Look at every tiny detail through your patients' eyes.

Building Confidence in Your Skills

Something else has happened on the downhill slide from Marcus Welby to Gregory House. The concept of "doctor's orders" has been robbed of much of its authority. Armed with reams of information (and misinformation) from the Web and elsewhere, patients are more

**You must come up with ways to
make patients feel that they get more from you
than from your competitors.**

ly become second nature. The true professionals in every industry and activity are the ones who turn in a consistently high performance every single time they step into an exam room, a courtroom, or an athletic arena.

The following sections discuss four areas to concentrate on—the basic components of a marketing-centered business worldview.

Demonstrating Empathy

In a market where politicians, payers, and plaintiff attorneys often characterize doctors as a bunch of greedy, money-driven leeches feeding on the bloated healthcare system, you face an uphill battle to convince your patients that you care about their health more than you care about your paycheck. Of course you care about your patients and their health! But do your patients know that? Do they trust your heart?

Empathize means "to enter into another's suffering." Everything from your vocal tone to your body language and other bedside manners affects your patients' faith in your love for them. Are you harried and hurried in the exam room? Or do pa-

likely to question or debate your medical decision-making. The best way to demonstrate your vast medical knowledge, experience, and training is through sharing your expertise in accessible ways. Your printed materials, Web pages, and educational efforts must be understandable without treating laypersons like village idiots. Never talk down to your patients—even those particularly slow to learn. (See the preceding section, "Demonstrating Empathy.") Replace the autocratic expert image with that of a coach—an expert partner in managing your patients' healthcare.

Adding Value to Every Transaction

Your patients have to pay more out-of-pocket than ever. That makes them think more like a consumer or customer than ever. We in the medical industry have traditionally shied away from calling patients "customers," but it's time to get over that reluctance. People want to get their money's worth—plain and simple. When your checkout clerk swipes a patient's credit or debit card for a couple hundred bucks, you don't

Continued on page 150

Referrals (from page 148)

want the patient thinking, “What? For 15 minutes in the exam room?” Patients have no idea of the complicated components behind professional fee pricing—and they don’t care. They just want to feel it was “worth it.”

How can you add value? The answer varies considerably from specialty to specialty and from encounter to encounter. Most importantly, you must sit down with your colleagues and your staff and come up with ways to make customers (including your referring physicians) feel that they get more from you than from your competitors.

Seizing “Moments of Truth”

Since Scandinavian Airlines Systems CEO Jan Carlzon introduced the concept of “moments of truth” back in the 1980s, the term has become part of standard

business vocabulary throughout the Western world. Simply put, customer service moments of truth occur whenever there are significant opportunities to make good or bad impressions on your customers. They happen dozens (perhaps hundreds) of times each day and often go unnoticed by owners and employees alike. Moments of truth pop up when your service delivery meets, exceeds, or falls short of your customers’ expectations.

When new patients make that first phone call or walk through your front door, they form critical first impressions that can leave them uttering “Wow!” Their response can range from amazing positive impressions all the way to deep disappointment or betrayal.

And these moments serve to reset their expectation level. Carlzon was right; he turned around the failing Swedish airline with stellar customer service, changed the way airlines

do business, and wrote a bestselling book about it that still influences management thinking today. Once you develop a marketing worldview in your medical practice, you’ll start seeing those moments of truth, and you will eventually meet and exceed your patients’ and referrers’ expectations—automatically. **PM**

Reference

¹ Henley CN. Does failing to promote your practice harm patients? Physicians Practice Blog, April 20, 2012. <http://www.physicianspractice.com/marketing/does-failing-promote-your-practice-harm-patients>.



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