



Finding Your Specialty

Here are some thoughts on choosing the right niche.

BY MARK TERRY

It's entirely possible that as a podiatric physician, you want to do it all—treat all patients for all ailments. You might view yourself as a generalist, or like the variety. It's also possible that you don't actually like treating everything but figure it's the only way to stay in business. Many podiatrists focus their practice on a specific specialty, such as sports medicine, surgery, diabetic patients, wound care, elderly, pediatrics, dermatology or others. Why specialize and how?

Pick Your Niche

Sometimes you may not know exactly what types of patients you want to see until you've been practicing for a while. You might, for example, decide you don't like surgery or that you don't care for wound care. You might find that you really like treating heel pain or diabetic patients.

Rem Jackson, CEO/Owner of Top Practices (Las Vegas, NV), says, "The more that you attempt to niche something, the more impact that you're going to have, especially with your marketing. There are reasons to specialize and try to sculpt your practice to see more of the kinds of patients that you'd rather see."

Jackson gives two reasons. The first is simply that you enjoy seeing certain types of patients and/or conditions more than others. The second, he says, "Is that the things you focus on would be the things that are far more profitable for your practice."



Rem Jackson

The first step, Jackson suggests, "is to decide if you want to specialize, and if you do, in what? Then you build your branding around what you've decided to focus on."

A Center of Excellence

One strategy is to dub yourself as a "Center of Excellence," if it's legal in your state. It doesn't even have to be as broad as "sports medicine" or "diabetes care." Jackson described a podiatric physician in New York who focused on heel pain, which, of course, can cover a lot of ground. The idea was to create a "Center of Excellence," although it's illegal to do so in New York. But the podiatric physician was able to brand his practice as a heel pain center, while

also more broadly treating podiatric conditions.

"You build your branding around the idea that you want to see more of these types of patients, whether it's patients with heel pain, or ingrown toenails, or diabetic patients, or whatever," Jackson says.

Let Your Patients Know

Larry Kosova, DPM, Family Podiatry Center (Naperville, IL), despite the name of the practice, specializes in sports medicine. Furthermore, over the years, the practice has created something of a sub-specialization in treating dance-related injuries.



Dr. Kosova

Kosova recounts how when he and his wife, Marlene Reid, DPM, originally bought the practice, it "wasn't the type of practice that we wanted. It was basically very, very general podiatry." In particular, at that time, Kosova wanted to perform more surgeries.

The first step was to let patients know. "Initially, people were com-

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ing in for nail care and we let them know, basically giving them an elevator pitch in 30 seconds to a minute, how we're trained. And if it was a senior, to let their children or grandchildren know that if they had an ankle injury or Achilles tendon injury to come here. It initially started by word-of-mouth, and we built up a surgical practice from there."

Over the years, as the practice evolved, they grew more interested in sports medicine, while still repairing injuries, particularly focused on soft tissue injury.

"A lot of the orthopedic surgeons in our area were looking at bone injuries. So there weren't many people looking for repairing soft tissue," Kosova noted.

If you plan to specialize and you're aware of other healthcare practitioners who treat similar patients, think about how your services



Dr. Yael

Reaching Out

Yakel points out that marketing for a specialty is similar to any other marketing. "You're out there. You're visible in shoe stores, sports clubs, gyms, sponsoring a race, or providing your time at a triathlon or a marathon."

In Kosova's case, he said, "I gave lectures to physical therapists in the area and let them know in multiple different groups and multiple lectures

page can work great. Build a sub-page that really focuses on what you want to specialize in and drive people to that with all of your marketing."

Specializing and Sub-Specialties

Yakel says that he was a high school and college athlete and had been interested in sports medicine early on, even though there was little exposure to it in podiatry school.

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throughout months and months the types of patients we were looking to see. We also lectured to some chiropractors. They didn't know our education very well at the time. Even today, when I lecture, sometimes they don't understand our education, so some of this is simply educating them on what we do. I usually present case studies, let's say to a PT group, to explain to them how we go about repairing an

And when he opened his own practice, initially, it was more of a general podiatric practice. It was his soccer-playing daughters who got him more focused on sports medicine, particularly soccer.

"You get to know the people that are running the soccer club. And a lot of times it started off just sponsoring a team. And from there you might sponsor a team in another sport. That way, you're getting your name out there," Yakel said.

Yakel even worked with a Denver-based pro soccer team. "I did a lot of stuff with soccer cleats, evaluations, soccer-oriented articles, and treatment. Within the niche of sports medicine, you carve out your own niche."

Kosova's story is similar...starting with a general practice, expanding into surgery and injury repair, then into more of a sports-oriented clientele. Educating a select population, sports injuries, turned into referrals as they built the practice. "With dance, it was really the same thing. Once you start getting patients referred to you and you treat them successfully, the community hears about you, really word-of-mouth, and all of a sudden you have a lot of them. So you can lecture to those groups. And in the case of dancers, they get injured a lot."

But Kosova adds that you also have to reach out with direct marketing, emails, and letters to direc-

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"Build a sub-page that really focuses on what you want to specialize in and drive people to that with all of your marketing."—Jackson

are different. How do you differentiate yourself?

Jamie Yakel, DPM, Colorado Center for Podiatric Sports Medicine (Longmont, CO), said, "You need to develop a reputation for getting people better. And I think as foot and ankle specialists, we have more at our disposal to treat people than, say, an orthopedist."

He adds that podiatry has a lot of technology at its disposal, such as "shockwave, laser, and orthotics, so as podiatrists, we have a better knowledge base of how to treat these people. It's not uncommon for an orthopedist to send patients to physical therapy or put them in a boot, and if that doesn't work, perform surgery, which isn't always necessary."

injury. Or how we work with physical therapy. That's been really successful over the years."

Just as you would "brand" your practice for how you want to be perceived—"You don't have to live with foot pain!" or "Heel pain can be treated, Get back on your feet!"—you focus on services.

Jackson suggests incorporating a story into your marketing that supports your branding, or the types of patients and conditions you ideally want to see. "Tell a really good story about ingrown toenails. Talk about it and feature it on your website on your home page. Don't build a new website—that will just mess up Google, but a well-developed sub-page that can even appear to be its own home-

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tors and just letting potential targeted patients know you're available. He has also lectured at the International Dance Medicine Society meeting.

So, if you are interested in focusing on heel pain, your outreach, website, and marketing should emphasize that. If you're interested in diabetic patients, then your branding and focus may be on wound care,

your practice can help with diabetic foot care emphasize your expertise, while also offering practical advice and answers to common questions.

A practice with a focus on dermatology would approach marketing and branding the same way. A page on the website might focus on podiatric dermatology with a description of the most common skin problems the practice treats, such as plantar warts, athlete's foot, fungal nails, dry skin, etc. And if you have testimonials on your website, make sure that the prominent ones focus on your areas of interest.

You will likely still see general podiatric patients. But over time, by emphasizing your interests, you will build up a larger clientele in that area.

If you're interested in diabetic patients, then your branding and focus may be on wound care, diabetes care, and peripheral artery disease.

Not Just Sports Medicine

Although this article has focused largely on sports medicine, the same principles apply to any specialty. Kosova has friends in podiatry that wanted to do pediatrics, "so they gear their whole practice toward that. We tend to see a lot of pediatrics and I even get some of their mothers, usually mothers, who ask if we also treat adults. Of course we do."

diabetes care, and peripheral artery disease. It should appear prominently on your website, and marketing materials should include references to diabetic foot care. You might have an entire webpage directed to "A Podiatrist's Guide to Diabetic Foot Care", with sections on what diabetes is, what the symptoms are, and how diabetes affects feet. Tips for foot care for diabetics and descriptions of how

The Marketing Calendar

When working with podiatric physicians on marketing, whether generalists or specialists, Jackson in-

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structs his clients to build a marketing calendar. He also recommends marketing five days a week, whether directly by the physician or someone on the staff, which he recognizes is difficult to do.

“Each month has a theme,” Jackson says. “So, maybe have six things... heel pain, ingrown toenails, bunions, or whatever, as long as they all support the types of conditions you want to treat. So, the month of May, for example you might talk about heel pain. You’ll run a video about heel pain one day. On another day, you’ll have testimonials about heel pain. If it’s legal in your state, have little images related to heel pain. Next month, we’ll focus on toenails and just start to cycle through all of those to build up the specific areas you would rather see.”

“The whole idea is to build patient confidence. Why would they choose you over other practices? But you have to follow through.”—Kosova

Map it out, have a plan. As the expression goes, plan the work, work the plan. Because it’s very easy, unless you absolutely love marketing, to let it move to the back burner or even forget about it entirely. But in the context of developing a specialty, the key is to focus those marketing efforts on conditions you’re most interested in treating.

“You have to have information, right?” Jackson says. “You want to have premium information that people would consider to be valuable. That could be e-books, pamphlets, videos, etc, but in any case they focus on what patients are worried about, and they can come in and request that from you.”

Time and Focus

Often, even podiatric practices that specialize continue to see and treat patients for general podiatric conditions. But over time, with focus and effort, it’s possible to build up the clientele you prefer to treat.

Kosova notes, “The whole idea is to build patient confidence. Why would they choose you over other practices? But you have to follow through. You can’t just stick something up on your website and not follow through. It’s branding and rebranding and it works. It’s a proven technique.” **PM**



Mark Terry is a freelance writer, editor, author and ghostwriter specializing in healthcare, medicine and biotechnology. He has written over 700 magazine and trade journal articles, 20 books, and dozens of white papers, market research reports and other materials. For more information, visit his websites: www.markterrywriter.com and www.markterrybooks.com.