

How to be Your Own Best Referral Source

By Jane E. Graebner, DPM



AAPP
AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
PODIATRIC PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

10 Maple Street, Suite 301
Middleton, MA 01949

978-646-9091

978-646-9092 fax

office@aappm.org

www.aappm.org

How To Be Your Own Best Referral Source

When I was asked to write about my best referral source for patients, I was a little worried. I wasn't sure that I had anything creative to say on this subject. But perhaps the simplest answer isn't as obvious to every podiatrist. Your best referral source is a better you. I don't think it's a coincidence that when I attended my 20th (ouch!) podiatry reunion, it was the friendliest and most well respected students who were succeeding in practice. They found true enjoyment in giving themselves to the profession, and the profession provided them with more than adequate income in return.

In contrast, it was enlightening to observe that those students who were not particularly kind or nice had either lost their license to practice, were struggling financially or had left the profession entirely. One student, who was caught cheating on an exam as a freshman, went on to lose his license by practicing outside the scope of podiatry. Another student, whose gold chains were outshined only by his arrogance, later had the distinction of acquiring the most lawsuits in the nation. He currently is enjoying bankruptcy and early retirement.

Attracting Patients

In order to attract more patients to your practice, you must consider what you have to offer your family, community, place of worship, staff and patients. Don't do this in an effort to increase your wealth or bolster your number of surgery patients, but out of generosity of spirit.

If you have little experience in giving service, then this might be a bit more difficult. Start small; sit in your waiting room and look around. What could you do to make your patients and their families more comfortable? Are the chairs padded and easy to rise from? Is the music pleasant? Is the reading material current and interesting?

Next, sit in your treatment room chair and look around. Think about what your patients see, hear and feel. Are there shiny or sharp instruments lying on the counter and creating anxiety? Is your burr in a prominent location, making the patient think of dental work? Do you draw up injections in front of the patient, causing them to become fearful even before the needle stick?

Spend time listening to what your staff members are telling your patients, both in person and on the telephone. Recently, a senior citizen was scheduled for knee surgery at the hospital and was told she must schedule her own pre-operative testing. Not only was this confusing to her, but many of our patients would not be capable of doing this. More importantly, this patient was not being provided with good service. The same is true of tedious insurance claims. Long before legislation made it mandatory for a doctor's office to bill Medicare for elderly patients, our office provided this service. We learned how confusing and difficult it was for many people to send in their own claims, especially to the secondary insurance company.

Outside Your Office

Once you've looked closely at developing a "patient-oriented" practice, then you can look outside the doors of your office. Do you volunteer for any charitable organizations? It isn't enough to spend five minutes writing a check that will be deducted from your taxes. Donations are nice, but volunteering your valuable time is an even more charitable effort.

One example would be to get involved with local scouting programs. For six years, I was a Girl Scout leader for my daughter's troop. Although these activities consumed a great deal of time, they created many good memories for us. The experience also taught my children that service is an important aspect of living in this world. Some of our service activities included cleaning up parks, working at the recycling center, collecting canned goods for our local food pantry, playing with handicapped children at a local preschool and singing Christmas carols at nursing homes in the area.

There are many ways in which to service the profession, as well. Many podiatrists give freely of their time to help improve podiatry through such organizations as the American Podiatric Medical Association (APMA), state associations, and the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgery (ACFAS), and through supporting and contributing to such publications as Podiatry Management and Podiatry Today. Others volunteer their medical services at Ground Zero and the Baja project, and through trips to underprivileged countries. These podiatrists are giving back to the profession, while actively working to make the world a better place. I feel certain that if you meet some of these individuals, you will find an interesting pattern. These doctors are likely to have full schedules of patients and more wealth than they need. The generous nature of these men and women simply attracts patients to their practices.

Summary

When faced with a new patient, I encourage students to refrain from asking themselves question like, "How many x-rays, surgeries or other services can I provide to help pay off my student loans?" Instead, I encourage them to ask themselves, "How can I make this patient so satisfied with my care that he will tell all his friends and relatives?"

If you concentrate on money, you likely will never earn enough. But if you focus on the patients you treat and not their insurance carriers, you will find yourself with a steady growing income that will never falter, even when Medicare decides to drop reimbursements by 5.4%. Furthermore, you will have the respect, love and admiration of your family, community and staff. Most importantly, you'll look in the mirror at the end of the day and feel truly satisfied with the podiatrist that you have become.

Jane Graebner, DPM, practices in Delaware and Ohio, and is board certified by the American Board of Podiatric Surgery. She is a past member of the Ohio Podiatric Medical Association (OPMA) Board of Trustees, a Fellow of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Management and course director of the OPMA Annual Assistants' Meeting. Dr. Graebner can be reached at graebner@midohio.net.