

# **Strategies to Establish and Build Relationships with Referring Physicians**

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## **Strategies to Establish and Build Relationships with Referring Physicians**

Podiatric physicians depend upon referrals to build and maintain a robust patient base. So, it goes without saying that developing and maintaining relationships with referring physicians is not only essential for business, but also essential for growth. Even though you think you may have this figured out, no matter who you are, there is plenty of room for improvement to better capture referrals from your local doctors. Primary care doctors need to be constantly reminded of what it is you do and how well you do it. No matter how long you have been in practice or how friendly you are with your referring physicians, they will forget unless you remind them.

So, the question is how can I effectively establish and build relationships with referring physicians? Strategies for building your referral base are dependent upon a whole host of factors, but what is most important is your willingness to develop a plan and having the discipline to execute it completely.

Here are four foundational components to a successful campaign to establish and build relationships with referring physicians:

1. Identify your referral sources.
2. Have a clear and specific idea as to what sets your practice apart from your competitors (diabetes focus, surgical focus, pediatrics).
3. Your referring physicians need to be CONSTANTLY reminded of what you do and how well you do it (your specific training, fellowship, memberships, papers you have written, etc.).
4. In order to build a robust referral base, your name needs to cross the desk of your referring desk consistently and in a positive fashion. (This is going to happen by sending notes to your doctors and also by positive patient comments.)
5. You must make sure your referring physicians have an easy and almost automatic way in which they can reach your office.

As you set out to build your referral base as a new practitioner or as an established one, fine-tune whatever concepts you choose to implement (hopefully all of them) to fit your own environment.

For instance, if you live in a dry county in Kentucky (like I do) hosting a wine tasting for referring doctors in your office is NOT the best option. If you live in New Jersey, this may be a great event, but the idea is to mold these ideas to fit your setting and taste.

### **Specific Strategies to Establish and Build Relationships with Referring Physicians.**

#### **Making the List**

Before you leave your office, making the most of your time and effort demands that you make a list of those who are your best and worst referrers. Once you've compiled this list, you can decide which sources have high potential for new business (multi-physician groups, new physicians in town), and those who have lower potential (low volume physicians, specialists),

A list is also the beginning of a database, which allows you to leverage your marketing effectiveness by collecting valuable personal and professional information: assistant's name, spouse and children's names, hobbies, interests, and especially, notes from past conversations. This database will allow you to be extremely effective in developing and maintaining strong referral relationships.

## **Stop What is Stopping You**

If marketing for you is a "when I have time" activity rather than a regular activity, it will likely end up on the bottom of your priority list. Without a commitment to a constantly establish and build your referral relationships, all other skills in the marketing toolbox are irrelevant. Prioritize marketing at or near the top of your list. Commit to a minimum level of 1-2 contacts a week—even if it's an e-mail that takes two minutes. Don't let a week pass where you haven't done SOME type of marketing.

## **The Road Trip**

No one can better represent your practice than you. If you want your practice to grow, it will take frequent investments of your time to make sure your referring doctors see your face and learn more about what you do.

If you don't have a practice brochure, now is the time to get busy. Carrying your own brochure to a physician visit is very effective and can serve as a great tool to remind you referring physician about what your practice offers.

While you don't want to overwhelm anyone with a laborious amount of minutiae, a summary of new things happening at your practice can be very effective. Especially if summarized in an effective brochure.

Things to avoid while visiting a referring doctor

1. Don't be arrogant
2. Don't only talk about yourself. Ask about kids, family, sports.
3. Don't take up too much time trying explaining esoteric podiatric facts to impress them.
4. Focus on what you have to help their patients, not on what will help you.
5. Don't speak negative about your competition. Focus on what you do well.
6. Don't bring elaborate gifts.
7. Don't make cold calls during a busy day.
8. Don't use profanity or try to be a comedian. No matter how funny you may be, your doctor doesn't refer to you based on your ability to tell jokes.

Things you NEED to do when you visit a referring doctor

1. Show interest in the referring physician's staff and family.
2. Keep referring physicians abreast of changes in your specialty, and invite them to support groups, seminars, or a lecture.
3. Be friendly, modest, and demonstrate strong ethics and excitement for what you do.
4. Recognize your referring physicians' accomplishments and those of his or her family members.
5. Identify interests to share with your referring physicians.

Don't forget, the easiest way to see your referring physicians is a visit to your local hospital physician's lounge. Making a habit of eating lunch at the physician's lounge 1-2 times a week can be an easy and effective way of getting face time with your referring doctors.

## **The Lecture**

No matter where you live, there are always avenues to lecture. From your local Wal-Mart to an area high school, opportunities are plentiful. What you should also look for are avenues to educate your referring physicians.

Instead of scheduling just a lunch at your local physician's office, ask to give a five minute talk about a common condition, such as plantar fasciitis.

As long as you are not over verbose and boring, this kind of interaction can be effective and educational for your referring doctor and their staff.

Partnering with local drug representatives to give a lecture is another way to focus your attention toward a physician audience. Drug reps will advertise your lecture to other offices and will typically provide an attractive dinner venue for your talk.

While many drug companies will pay for you to lecture, don't be afraid to offer to lecture for free. These types of lectures not only attract referring doctors, but also attract referring nurse practitioners as well.

### **Inviting Other Office Staff to Your Office**

Building relationships with referring physician staffs (in other offices or in the hospital) can often be as good as building relationships with the physician.

Reward those office staff members that make frequent phone calls to refer patients. Goodwill spreads quickly when a staff member feels good about making a referral.

A great way to build loyal office staff ambassadors for your practice is by providing them with educational opportunities. Lunch and learn sessions, although not a new concept, can be very effective in demonstrating your degree of professionalism.

Knowledgeable referring staff will not only calculate into more referrals, but also good word of mouth.

Here are some pearls in hosting an office staff "lunch and learn" meeting:

1. Be sure to invite both the staff and the physician.
2. Prepare a packet of information for each attendee that contains referral pads, insurance information, a rolodex card, and written information on foot injuries.
3. Keep your lecture short and informative.
4. Offer a question and answer program about anything related to podiatry or office organization.
5. Review all of your ancillary services that you offer.
6. Always send a thank you card after each visit.

### **Prompt Letters**

Primary-care physicians give high marks to the specialist who provides timely and thorough communication about the care of the patient. Always follow up with a brief, concise report that includes findings and recommendations. Don't worry about sending eloquent letters or gifts. Most referring doctors just want to know about the patient.

Since your letters should be brief and to the point, you might want to develop a letterhead that not only has your name at the top, but also a list of things you see and do.

Effective letterhead can do several things besides display your name and contact information. It can display your credentials, professional memberships, and the diagnoses you see and ancillary services you offer. Make sure, of course, that your letterhead remains professional and not too busy.

### **Making it Simple.**

If it is a logistical nightmare for another doctor's office to schedule an appointment at your office, then trust me, that office will stop calling.

If there was one key principle that every new practitioner should remember is to always be available to see a referring doctor's patient, even when it may not be convenient.

When a primary-care physician calls the office to make a referral, always instruct office staff to put the call through to the specialist immediately so you can discuss the patient before the appointment is scheduled.

Make sure your office staff understands how important it is when a referring doctor calls. Instruct them to use appropriate customer service skills and to never leave them on hold for too long.

Another great tool that is often employed in establishing relationships is to develop and dispense a referral pad to all of your referring doctors. Your referral pad should consist of the following information;

1. Your business name and your 800 number.
2. A good map to your office and a list of all of your satellite clinic locations.
3. A list of the common diagnoses you see (another reminder to the physician).
4. A list of all of your ancillary services.

Make your referral pad small enough to keep in the treatment rooms of your referring doctors thus making it simple to find and use. Remember to make referring to your office simple and easy!

### **Hosting and Writing**

Yes, your referring doctors do read the paper, but what is more important is that their patients read the paper too.

If you don't write articles for your local paper, you are missing out on a great opportunity to establish credibility and a reputation for being an expert in your field.

It's all about name recognition and giving back to your community. When patients see your name in the paper or see that you have authored papers in your lobby, you instantly generate professional respect.

The same is true with your referring doctors. Send them a copy of an article you have written, or better yet, personally deliver it. Let them know that you are involved in continuing education and that you care about the community.

Starting a support or educational group that meets in your office can be a great tool to build referrals. When you advertise your group, send letters to your referring doctors asking them to invite patients to your group.

Here are some ideas of what you can do in your office.

1. Running Shoe Clinic
2. Amputation Support Group
3. Amputation Prevention Group
4. Diabetes Education Group
5. Pediatric Screening Day

### **Pick up the Phone**

If you don't make phone calls to your referring physicians to inform them of patients' progress, you may be missing an opportunity. Most referring doctors respond really well to a direct, personal approach, while others prefer just a simple letter. Whether by phone, letter, or e-mail, make sure to follow up with the correct physician if dealing with a large practice, to maintain a seamless continuity of care.

## **Do unto Others...**

The key to encouraging repeat referrals is the patient's positive experience with your office. Once patients are sent to you, they can be your best emissaries or your worst enemies. You always want patients to return to their physician and say that they were treated well. When this happens, referring physicians tend to have greater confidence making future referrals.

If patients have negative experiences, referring physicians generally wait to see if a pattern develops. One too many patient complaints will likely have a negative impact on the flow of referrals.

Satisfied patients are responsible for about half of the practice's referrals. For most people, podiatry visits are something that they probably not go through by choice, so making the experience as palatable and positive as possible is fundamental.

## **Exceeding Expectations and Inspiring Confidence.**

Experts have said that the secret to medical success is "to inspire confidence". It is also said that the doctor who possesses this gift can practically "raise the dead." Inspiring patient confidence encompasses more than the medical service rendered. It involves the total experience of the patient visit, and if you don't think this is important in your efforts toward building referral relationships, think again.

Studies have shown that a pleased patient is likely to tell 12 other people, usually in the first 14 days after their visit. This presents you with a great opportunity to make a great impression with the patient's doctor and the community.

Here are some other points to consider about exceeding expectations;

1. Conduct satisfaction surveys to determine what your practice can do to improve the patient's experience - and make relevant changes
2. Make sure your staff is involved in making the patients experience in your office exceptional
3. Ask you patients to let their doctor know how happy they are about their results.

## **Enlist Your Team**

Just like anything in a podiatric office, there are tasks you can delegate, and many protocols you can create which will allow your office team to support your marketing efforts. If you have a sharp, people-oriented assistant, give them your referral list and have them start scheduling lunches for you on a regular basis.

Collect data on referral source birthdays, anniversaries, and create a system that has your staff generating cards and notes for you to sign. Your marketing effectiveness can be multiplied many times through the effective use of staff and the development of marketing support systems.

## **Consistency Is Key**

Consistent contact over time with your referring doctors creates a continuing high level of awareness that will build a trusted relationship. Annual holiday cards and lunches are great, but those types of efforts do little in building strong relationships. Personal contact with your best referral sources at least four times a year, plus occasional notes, cards, and e-mails, builds trust and referrals. "Yo-yo" marketing—a lot when work is slow, then none for months because you're busy—is highly ineffective.

Relationships wax and wane, and creating an image of periodic desperation when things are running slow will definitely not build trust. Make marketing a priority in busy times as well as slow ones.