

Ten Winning Ideas for Internal Marketing of Your Practice



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Large corporations throughout America have redirected their marketing efforts from customer retention to new customer development. As physicians, we often concentrate too much on marketing outside the office. As a result, we lose focus of our most powerful marketing opportunity: your patient's total experience in your office. We will discuss ten ideas for internal marketing written by members of the American Academy of Podiatric Practice Medicine throughout the country.

#1: Simple Pearls for Internal Marketing

When we consider marketing strategies for a medical practice, we often distinguish between *internal* and *external* means. External marketing involves advertisements that are usually either print (newspaper, flyers, etc.) or electronic (radio, television and web site) in nature. These are disseminated to the community at large.

Internal marketing involves those processes that promote your practice through *behavioral* activities within the office. When the current managed care environment evolved, most practitioners recognized that the most effective means of marketing shifted from external to internal. Patients were no longer drawn to a particular office because of visual advertisements, but rather other attributes, most of which are driven by Primary Care Physicians. A great deal of goodwill may be acquired through meticulous attention to these factors.

Ten examples of effective internal marketing include:

1. Strengthening and exercising personal charisma (communication skills).
2. Professional and social interaction with Primary Care Physicians
3. Timely follow up phone calls to patients
4. Timely reports to Primary Care Physicians
5. Written literature explaining the patient's diagnosis
6. A practice brochure/ business cards detailing your expertise and conditions treated
7. Maintaining availability
8. A recorded message for callers "on hold".
9. Maintaining a bright, cheerful attractive setting
10. And lastly, never feel intimidated to ask for referrals from very satisfied patients!

Internal marketing is a strong practice enhancement tool. It delivers a far more powerful punch than external marketing in our quest for highly motivated loyal patients. Its cost-to-benefit ratio is one that simply cannot be beat.

#2: Bring Holiday Wishes to Your Patients

The earliest experiences I had with internal marketing were derived from very simple, now seemingly obvious, ideas. The doctors I worked with at that time sent birthday cards to patients, especially to long-time patients and to those with "special" birthdays. Patients loved that remembrance, and we were amazed to hear that sometimes ours was the only card that they had received! Suppliers such as Medical Arts Press have a variety of foot-themed cards, and with the help of computers, it would not be difficult to personalize the design.

Holiday greeting cards are also very well received. Of course, all physicians receive greeting cards from the radiology groups and the DME suppliers who appreciate the business and want our continued referrals, but the ones we really appreciate are from those patients who remember us on their lists. Not surprisingly, patients also put special value on cards from the doctors who care enough to remember. That means they also put special value on the doctor and staff who took the extra time just for them.

In some offices, either “Season’s Greetings” or “Merry Christmas” messages are sent out. A dentist I went to for many years sent Thanksgiving greetings instead. He was also a poet, and usually wrote his message in verse, printing it on paper with autumn images. He theorized that everyone celebrates Thanksgiving, and so everyone could appreciate his greeting. We always enjoyed his original greetings and looked forward to them.

Postage is certainly a much greater consideration these days, but perhaps you could make up the difference by printing your own message on paper you have purchased in bulk. Another thought is to send personalized e-cards to patients over the Internet. A small remembrance on a special occasion will assure that you are also remembered!

#3: Recalling Your Friends (AKA Patients)

Isn’t it nice to get a phone call from a friend who just wants to catch up with you and see how you are doing? It will be no surprise to discover that this can work with your patients as well. These calls can quickly become the cornerstone of a successful internal marketing effort.

Your practice has a treasure trove of former patients who are satisfied with the care that they received in your office. Yet through careful inspection of your files, it is obvious that many patients have been discharged with good results but have received no further contact. The further back you go in your files, the larger this group will become.

Why not pull those records and call the patients? You do not need a particular reason to do so. You are just calling to say, “How are you?” What you can expect is that the patient will be surprised if not shocked that their podiatrist’s office is calling. This is perfectly normal. Continue the conversation for a minute. Let them know you have not seen them in a while and it is a courtesy call. Generally, these conversations do not even touch on a podiatric complaint. The patient will be very impressed.

Train your staff to make these calls consistently, according to the year the patients were last seen. You will see the return of many of these “woodwork” patients in a matter of weeks.

#4: Educate Your Patients about YOU!

A brag book is another way to internally market a practice. This book will not only display your accolades and accomplishments, but it will show patients your community involvement. Surprisingly, patients will ask the physician to volunteer at certain events.

In our office, our many accolades are exhibited on the walls of the waiting area. We have many newspaper articles and journals that celebrate our involvement and contributions. For instance, one of our partners was honored by our hometown newspaper for volunteering his medical services at the World Trade Center site.

In addition, our brag book has many of the groups’ accomplishments. These include board certifications and appointments in the community. Another associate in our group is a former faculty member at a medical school, and we tend to promote that appointment. This appointment gives the patient a feeling that she is with a specialist, and that patient will tell other potential patients about the scholarly attainments of our group.

As a result of displaying our achievements, our group has been asked to participate in several lectures and health fairs. Many patients can relate to your community involvement because they contribute or belong to the same organizations. Moreover, this is a source of a new patient base and revenue. This newly generated clientele can also lead to many new patient referrals. A brag book is one of the best ways to internally market the practice. This “special book” can be an invaluable tool for the new practitioner.

#5: There’s No Place Like Home:

A home-like atmosphere is another aspect of internally marketing your practice. Many patients have described our office as “so comfortable” or “a great place to hang out.” The aura of your office from the front to back must exude this comfort level, while still maintaining a professional appearance.

Lighting is critical in our office. In addition to fluorescent lights, we have plenty of windows to allow natural light in. A well light room seems to have a favorable effect on a patient’s mood. It is very satisfying to have a patient comment on our bright and cheery treatment rooms.

We also place fresh flowers in our treatment rooms. Patients enjoy this gesture. They feel we are compassionate and attentive to detail. In addition to giving our office a “homey” feeling, the flowers are a great conversation piece. We get many referrals from patients who appreciate our office setting.

#6: In-office Dispensing for Patient Building

In-office dispensing of fee-for-service and insurance-reimbursed products is an effective way to increase your bottom line. Our practice has dispensed items to patients for almost 12 years, and we regularly add new products. The number of podiatric physicians who dispense is growing rapidly. Podiatrists have perhaps the widest selection of unique and sought after products in medicine today! Consider starting with a few “anchor items” that typically move quickly off the shelves.

These items should include Ace bandages, Cam walkers, 20% Urea cream, Fungal nail preparation, Emollient cream for patients with diabetes, Astringent soaks, Shower guards, and silicone digital mesh tubes.

There are obviously many more products that you can carry, but if you have never dispensed in your office before, it is best to begin by building on this simple product base. You should train your staff to dispense these items as well and give them free samples to use themselves. Some offices even have a profit-sharing bonus structure linked to volume of product dispensed.

Display these products professionally in

treatment rooms or at patient checkout. You may even consider signs in the office that focus on a product or two.

The obvious financial benefits aside, dispensing is a timesaver that leads to increased overall patient satisfaction. You and your staff will see that the patient receives the appropriate product and instructions for their condition. This completely eliminates the guesswork on the part of the patient, thereby improving compliance. There is no waiting in long lines at the pharmacy. Your patients will be grateful for this, and will likely tell

their family and friends of their experience at your office. Patients will also return to you for refills for years to come.

#7: God Gave Us Two Ears and One Mouth for a Reason

Listening is a necessary skill in helping us to hit a home run in patient satisfaction. That is why we have two ears and one mouth. No one has a finer command of the language than the person who keeps their mouth shut, and no one ever got a stomachache from swallowing their words.

There are several benefits of listening for your practice:

- listen to others and they will listen to you
- you’ll get to know more and with more accuracy
- you gain other’s trust
- improved employee retention and satisfaction

- less mistakes are made

Patients have come to expect that doctors and staff are poor listeners. So focusing on listening skills throughout your office is an excellent opportunity to provide outrageous customer service. Focus on listening with your ears, eyes and heart!

#8: Do You See Enough Kids in Your Practice?

As busy as they are, pediatricians are busy and looking for ways to serve their patients more efficiently. Their schedules are full of croup, fever, flu and yes...foot pathology. The opportunity to cultivate podiatric pediatric referrals is present in every pediatric practice nationwide. These are some simple techniques you can employ to have a thriving pediatric referral network.

First, target ailments that you are commonly seen by pediatricians and are within your scope. Almost every podiatrist can treat verruca, ingrown nails and pronation. Many pediatricians have neither the time nor the desire to treat these problems. You can expand into pediatric heel pain, apophysitis, in-toeing and sports injuries. The key is to market your skills effectively to the pediatrician. Start your marketing effort with a visit to a local pediatric practice. Go just before lunch in order to catch doctors and nurses at a convenient time. Every effort is made to bring other doctors back and they are promptly seen. Our office provides an in-service to the staff on children's foot pathology. Focus on the pre-determined pathology that you will be treating, and don't be embarrassed to ask for referrals. Before leaving, the in service is scheduled and we leave our office infocard (a business envelope sized card with a picture of the doctors, what we treat, where we are and maps to get there on it). Tell the pediatrician that you will see their patients promptly and handle any emergencies immediately.

When the pediatrician calls you, see the patient right away. Most doctors would feel that they are imposing by asking for an appointment that day, so they will appreciate your efforts. Offer it before they ever have to ask and I assure you it will not go unnoticed. You will see more patients, and soon you will see their partner's patients as well. Keep in mind that when a child is sick or in pain, the parents become worried and apprehensive. Prompt appointments help the patient, the parents, the referring doctor and ultimately your practice.

Quick Tip – When your young patient is being treated for verucca, discuss the contagious nature of warts with anyone else in the treatment room. Give them a free screening on the spot and encourage the rest of the family to come in for the same. You will find more warts and increase your patient base as a result of your diligence!

#9: Reducing Waiting Time Through Efficiency

I would like to give you some ideas on how to “open” your schedule just enough to see a few more patients a day.

First and foremost, the doctor must start on time. By “on time”, I mean your assistant should bring back your first patient five to seven minutes before the first scheduled appointment time. This gives the assistant time to help the patient back to the room, remove their shoes, converse appropriately with them, and get the chart back to you. This way, you are actually entering the treatment room at the appointed time.

Another time saving effort is for you to go through your charts before the day begins. Next to each patient's name, write down your treatment plan. This may include x-rays, taping, injection, orthotic casting, surgical redressing, etc. This takes about one hour. If you become familiar with your patient's charts and make the appropriate plans before the day begins, you will have an extra hour in which to see patients during the day.

We prefill all of our injections at the beginning of the day. If it takes 30 seconds to fill each of maybe 15 injections a day, that gives us seven extra minutes to see another patient. We also premake “orthotic casting kits”. These include a pair of gloves, six strips of plaster, a splatter

sheet and the orthotic order form. The time we save by assembling these materials ahead of time gives us twelve minutes to see another patient or two.

Pre-cut or order ready-made padding. Patients are not impressed with your “arts and crafts” skills. If it takes 30 seconds to cut each of 12 pads used in a day, that’s six more minutes to spend with patients. .

#10: Information is Powerful

In today's competitive managed care environment, one of the most critical factors in internal marketing is making a good (and prompt) impression on the primary care physicians (PCPs). I always send them a Patient Treatment Update form that I developed several years back (See exhibit A).

For new patients, complete one of these forms and send it to their PCP, regardless of whether or not they were referred. I simply want their PCP to know that I am treating them. It serves not only to complete that patient's chart in their primary doctor's office, but through repetition it puts my name in the PCP's head for future foot/ankle problems.

Keeping the PCP apprised of treatment makes me look good. It makes the PCP look good, because the next time they see that patient back in their office, they can ask them how the treatment plan is working out. Furthermore, keeping the PCP informed throughout treatment makes procedures such as elective surgery an easier transition.

These pearls, though seemingly simply, can have a tremendous impact on the success of any practice, new or established. Consider working these thoughts into the framework of your office, and watch your patient base (and your profit margins) grow exponentially!

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