

Do Medical Practices Really Have to Market Anymore?



With more changes coming to healthcare in 2013 and 2014, should practices be looking at traditional marketing, social media marketing, or do they even have to market at all? I asked healthcare marketer Greg Fawcett from Precision Marketing Partners to talk to me about the future of marketing for the medical practice.

Mary Pat: There is currently a physician shortage that is expected to become more severe in the coming years. If each physician is expected to have more patients than s/he can handle, why is marketing a medical practice important in the current/future environment?

Greg: Natural attrition contributes to the loss of clients in all types of businesses, and medical practices are no exception. No matter how many patients you have or how loyal

they are, death, relocation or a switch to managed care programs that you don't belong to are bound to reduce your client list over time. Unless you're vigilant and market consistently to replace those patients you lose, you'll wake up one day to the realization that business isn't what it used to be!

Here are a few of the reasons why you need to do medical practice marketing:

- Establish your practice's reputation as specialists in a particular field of medicine
- Attract new patients to build your practice
- Increase awareness of your practice and create a dominant presence in your specific community
- Improve your efficiencies and maximize the return on your financial investment

Mary Pat: Many medical practices seem to be doing fine using their in-house talent for marketing. What is the value proposition for taking on the additional expense of hiring a professional for marketing?

Greg: Comprehensive management of your medical practice depends on making the most of all opportunities to achieve economies of scale. Marketing may be necessary, but it isn't practical to do it yourself if it's not your area of expertise. Appointing a professional medical practice consultant with in-depth knowledge of inbound marketing techniques can help you overcome the issues your practice faces, and find ways to achieve financial success that benefit your patients and staff.

Mary Pat: So much in healthcare is changing, but a lot is happening in marketing too: how has the internet changed how medical groups can market their services?

Greg: Medical practice marketing using new media channels

offers the opportunity for patients to comment, write reviews and spread the word through social networking. Healthcare is uniquely service-driven, and research shows that 80% of consumers trust the advice or opinion of others.

This has had significant impact over the past 20 years, mostly because the Internet has given people the power and ability to choose for themselves what information they want to receive. It also gives patients a choice of the channels through which they prefer to consume it.

Mary Pat: Is it true that social media is free advertising and that every practice should be taking advantage of this?

Greg: Absolutely. Social media is not entirely free, because it carries a cost in time for someone to craft, post and monitor content in order to be effective. It is much cheaper, however, than any form of traditional media, and it gives you direct access to the burgeoning youth market. These are your patients of the future, while their parents and grandparents are current patients for whom they may be making healthcare decisions.

Mary Pat: What is Inbound Marketing?

Greg: Inbound marketing focuses on providing information that generates interest among the members of your target audience who are actively looking for your products and services. In the medical practice marketing context, this translates into making it easy for your prospects to find you, then giving them information that creates demand using methods such as content marketing, social networking and publishing.

This differs from outbound marketing, which relies more on advertising spend than a digital presence and “pushing” information at the target market through traditional mass media channels, such as television, print publications, radio advertising, direct mail campaigns and email blasts.

Mary Pat: What about a practice's or provider's reputation? How does marketing manage that part of the brand?

Greg: Your brand is associated with your services and the reputation or position you hold among your patients and target audience. The Internet has made it much easier to disseminate feedback about your brand, both positive and negative. By taking a proactive approach to marketing, you can manage the impact of patient commentary on your brand.

- Build up your online reputation through addressing issues raised by patients.
- Encourage open feedback online in a forum or on social media.
- Thank users for positive feedback, and address negative feedback publicly to resolve problems.
- Increase the value you offer to users by delivering news and information online.

Mary Pat: What types of marketing challenges are your healthcare clients facing in today's market?

Greg: With the healthcare industry currently in a state of transition and the reduced marketing budgets resulting from the economic slump, medical practices face the challenge of finding ways to promote their services with far less funds. In addition, the industry's high levels of both regulation and litigation make practitioners nervous about the relative "freedom" of the online environment.

It's an ideal time for medical practice marketing to embrace managed content marketing, take a strategic approach to carefully controlled social media, and start building databases of market segments they can target with specific approaches.

Mary Pat: If a physician wanted to start a new solo practice from scratch – what would be your recommendation for an initial marketing plan?

Greg: Any initial marketing plan needs a comprehensive mix of media with components of inbound and outbound marketing. While traditional medical practice marketing still has a place, particularly with the older generations, new media offers opportunities for achieving significant results at vastly reduced costs.

Begin with a branding strategy, carry it through your website design, and get your online presence up and running as fast as possible. Then drive traffic to your various profiles using traditional media, and once you get it, engage users online to build up relationships. Gather intel about your audience from the feedback you get, and use that to inform direct and email marketing campaigns and special promotions.

Mary Pat: Does a medical practice have to use a marketing firm like yours for “everything”? What are the options for practices of different sizes, specialties and budgets?

Greg: To implement a cohesive marketing plan, it's best to keep all your marketing in one place. This helps to achieve an integrated program using a variety of media such as direct mail and print marketing as well as the digital marketing options of SEO, Google AdWords and some of the other regular inbound methods. Most agencies can work side-by-side with your own marketing personnel or other practitioners, if you prefer this approach.

Our firm works best with small to mid-size practices that have a local community presence and would like to expand their market. Budgets vary depending on the scope of the work.

Mary Pat: Is there a single basic step that you would advise all healthcare entities to take immediately to market their groups?

Greg: Start a blog. Content marketing is huge, and it helps with one of the healthcare industries biggest challenges, which is to remain relevant to its rapidly-changing market. By

promoting a channel that offers free information and advice to patients, you can build up a readership to which you can communicate messages directly and in a time-sensitive manner.

You can learn more about Precision Marketing Partners at their website, or if you'd like to talk more about healthcare marketing, you can contact Greg Fawcett at greg@pmpnc.com or call him at (919) 457-6566.

