



Special Section: Marketing Mastery

Marketing From The Inside

By Lynn Yoffee

It could happen to anyone—an unexpected accident or life event takes you away from your practice. For Dr. John Turner of Roswell West Medical Center (RWMC) a serious accident pulled him away from his thriving practice with a 2,000-plus patient base for six months. On top of that, his partner was out for a lengthy period of time due to illness. Luckily their practice stayed afloat during the down time thanks in part to a loyal patient base as well as a strong staff who kept the wheels turning. Upon his return Turner faced regaining the momentum.

“I knew I wanted and needed more than an initial boost to get more patients coming through the door,” says Dr. Turner. “I needed a long-term game plan that would insure my existing patients were well cared for and that plenty of new patients would continue to come in consistently via referrals and other means. I not only wanted to regain ground...I was ready to grow the practice in a big way.”

It's a struggle in most practices to keep the marketing wheels turning. For many chiropractors, it usually comes in spurts—an ad here, a patient referral gift there. And how do you know if those individual efforts really pay off? Who has time to track the numbers?

Many chiropractors are consumed with the idea of office efficiency. Scheduling, billing, collections and other administrative functions

are all key to a smooth-running practice. And all too often, they spend money on marketing or advertising schemes to get more patients only to be discouraged with the results. One opportunity they're often overlooking is a potential gold mine of new patient referrals: internal marketing to their existing patient base.

Seeking Outside Expertise Can Help

In an effort to attain a level of continuity in new patients, Turner hired a specialized marketing firm to relieve him of the burden of attracting more patients, and hustling to keep his most valuable resource: his existing patients. It was a decision that allowed him to focus on caring for patients. It was a decision that also resulted in a tremendous pay-off with a huge and ongoing boost in patient referrals every month. His new patients jumped from an average of 27 per month to almost 40 in six months and the figure is still climbing.

Turner had all the makings of a patient-centered clinic: Quality care, efficient administrative mechanisms, a pleasant, newly renovated office environment and cutting-edge technology to support both the delivery of care and administrative functions. So, what would it take to turn his good practice into a more robust, growth-oriented health care business?

"A healthy practice should be getting at least 50 percent of its new patients via patient referrals from existing patients, so you've got to implement a program that will tap into that wealth of referrals," says Judy Munroe, of Consistent Marketing, Inc., (CMI) an Alpharetta, Ga.-based medical marketing firm that specializes in delivering turnkey internal and external marketing services for chiropractors.

"A really effective and impressive office like Dr. Turner's has a tremendous impact on patient referrals. But you've got to back that up with a series of ongoing internal marketing efforts as an insurance policy—a policy that guarantees your patients are not only happy with the care they receive but are motivated enough by that care and attention to refer their friends and family," Munroe says. "It doesn't happen automatically and it doesn't happen with sporadic marketing."

Internal Marketing Strategies

"To be honest, I'm not sure all of my patients were aware of all of the services available in our clinic," Turner says. "Although I knew my patients were happy with their care, I wasn't sure I had the time it would take to stimulate them to refer or to reactivate patients who hadn't been in for a while."

External Marketing Strategy:

Patient Appreciation Day
After you've conquered the internal marketing beast, what's next? External marketing, of course. Patient appreciation days (PAD) can be a way to thank your existing patients, generate new business and create brand awareness in your community. Consistent Marketing, Inc., an Alpharetta, Ga.-based medical marketing firm coordinated a PAD for Roswell West Medical Center that resulted in 34 new patients and \$25,500 in new patient revenue from the one-day goodwill event. The firm offers these tips when planning a PAD of your own. Show the community you care. At RWMC event, the practice portrayed the image of being caring members of the community by hooking the event to a charitable effort that raised money for a needy child. Everyone who participated in the PAD was asked to give a donation to a fund for the child in lieu of payment for services. Showcase your services. At the event new patients received a free exam and X-rays, cholesterol checks, sports injury evaluations and 10-minute chair massage. "The idea was to expose the patient to as many services as possible on that day in order for them to get a feel of the entire clinic and be introduced to all of the providers," says

CMI implemented a cadre of internal marketing efforts that not only addressed Turner's concerns, but exceeded his expectations. Here are a few of their strategies:

A quarterly newsletter now keeps Dr. Turner in touch with his patients. But it's more than a letter, it's a tool to prompt referrals with contests and prizes, reactivations of patients who read about new services offered and a mechanism for obtaining feedback from patients. Additionally, Turner uses the letter as an educational tool on topics ranging from nutritional advice to disease-specific care. Staff members are featured regularly, giving patients a more personal connection. Simple contests are included, such as crossword puzzles, which patients fax back to win free services.

Gift bags establish immediate rapport with new patients. Reusable goodies including water bottles, T-shirts, ice packs and more are all emblazoned with the center's logo. The gifts build the practice's "brand" and "image" in the community because they are all items that patients will actually use, essentially making them walking ads for the practice.

New patient letters, referral letters, and reactivation letters are sent every single month. "It really comes down to database management and CMI now handles that for us," Turner says. The agency updates the database regularly so that all of Turner's patients feel welcomed and in touch with the clinic. Patients are usually surprised by the unexpected positive communication. Reactivation letters are used to determine the reason a patient dropped out of care. If there was a problem, it's identified and resolved. Sometimes it just serves as a simple reminder for busy patients to "come back."

Referral coupons tucked into the new patient bags lead to referral gifts. It's important to provide incentive to patients. They might be happy campers on their way to better health, but the chance of winning movie tickets or a digital camera provides even more incentive to refer a new patient. "Referral gifts are also given to the existing patients to extend thanks for their confidence in the healthcare provider. How many chiropractors are thanking their patients on a regular basis?" Munroe points out.

Like many professionals who seek help from other specialists, Turner acknowledged that he already knew what it would take to build his practice, he was just torn between spending the time to do it himself or spending the money to have someone else do it for him. He chose the latter and it's been an investment in change and a way to introduce long-term vigorous growth without sacrificing his time with patients. "After all, I got into this because I wanted to care for more patients. But I know it's a business too, and one of the key principles of being an entrepreneur is knowing when it's wise to delegate certain responsibilities.

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Dr. John Turner.
Offer fun activities and goodies. In addition to the free services, the clinic provided refreshments, gave away pounds of gourmet coffee, movie passes, local restaurant coupons and other gifts. Activities for the kids included a cotton candy machine, spin art, face painting and a moon walk. Local vendors were asked to donate their services as part of the charitable effort. Get the word out. The PAD was advertised with notices in the practice's newsletter, a banner outside the office, letters to VIP patients followed up with phone calls and other advertising.

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