Boost Referrals at Your Medical Practice

By Shelly K. Schwartz [5]

If you want to boost referrals at your medical practice, remember, it's the little touches that make your practice memorable.

Source: Physicians Practice

Like most specialty groups, Carolina Women's Health in Raleigh, N.C., relies heavily on referrals from other physicians to grow its patient base. But the two-provider practice doesn't wait for business to come to them. They go out after it. "We make a real effort to reach out to primary-care physicians and other practices in our community to let them know what we have to offer," says administrator Elisa Barnes. "I'll go with one of our physicians to a different practice every month and bring lunch or breakfast so we get face-to-face time with their physicians. Very often that's what gets us the referrals."

Well played, says Mary Pat Whaley, a practice administrator for nearly 30 years and founder of Manage My Practice consulting firm in Durham, N.C. In an era where patients are increasingly directed to in-network providers by their insurance plans, or practices affiliated with a specific hospital, building your referral network requires a guerilla marketing approach. "Physicians have traditionally been taught that the best marketing tool is providing quality care and that if they do that, the patients will come," says Whaley. "We now know that patients have different perceptions of quality. They may be looking for electronic communications or cutting edge medical equipment. They may be directed to different providers based on their insurance plan, and they may be price shopping because their deductibles are higher."

Physician referrals
As such, practices today must think like a scrappy upstart. Your first step, says Marlee Ward, president of Rx MD Marketing Solutions in Orlando, Fla., is to determine who your referral sources are. Create a list of all the providers in your community, including both prospective and existing referrers, she suggests. Pay special attention to those with the highest referring power, and identify those that already refer to you often so you can focus your resources on developing those relationships. "Most practices do not do this well at all," says Ward. "They have a hard time putting their finger on who their best referral sources are." Try inviting referral sources with whom you haven't yet interacted to attend a seminar at your practice, or send a letter of introduction that invites them to visit your office for a look at what you can offer their patients, says Ward. The best-run practices, says Ward, also ask new patients how they heard about them — be it online, through marketing materials, or by referral from another patient or provider. That can be easily accomplished by adding a check box on your registration form, or instructing your front-desk staff or medical assistants to question new patients in a friendly, conversational way. "Any time a patient comes through a referral source you should make a note of it in an Excel spreadsheet or other list so you can start to identify who your best referring physicians are," says Ward.

To help formalize the process, Ward recommends designating a representative from your staff to serve as a liaison between your practice and your referrers. That person should reach out regularly to the staff members at referring physician's offices to ensure your practice is doing everything it can to make their job easier. If you can't afford the manpower, says Ward, e-mailing marketing collateral that highlights new procedures available in your office, or offering a pop quiz about your specialty with a gift-card prize attached can also be effective in keeping your practice top of mind. As you look to boost your referral base, keep in mind that many urgent care clinics and hospitals refer patients upon check-out to a primary-care physician, if they don't already have one, says Whaley. Some hospitals, of course, only refer to practices with which it is affiliated, but others refer to a list of community-based primary-care physicians on a rotation basis. "In a lot of hospitals, the hospitalists or case managers are setting up those appointments directly at the time of discharge," says Whaley. "You need to find out who that person is at your local hospital and get on that list."

Be accommodating
Once you get the referral, don't drop the ball. Make every effort to meet the needs of the referring...
physician, says Barnes. "Some prefer to have their patients call us directly and others prefer to use a 
tear pad that they fill out and fax to us," she says. "We get referrals in a variety of different ways and 
we accommodate them all."
That's an important part of developing your referral base, says Whaley. "You have to be willing and 
able to take referrals when the physician wants that patient to be seen," she says. Thank physicians, 
as well, each time they refer a patient to your practice by sending a handwritten note to their office. 
And touch base with their staff on a regular basis. Whaley notes schedulers and medical assistants 
are often the ones to point patients in the direction of specialists. "Build bonds with those people by 
asking how you can make it easier or faster for them."
For example, are they getting their test results or records from your office fast enough, and in the 
manner that is most convenient to them? Do they wish to have a dedicated hotline for their referrals, 
or is it more convenient to leave information on an answering machine? Would they prefer to have 
test results and medical reports faxed over, e-mailed in digital format, or hand delivered? "That's 
what you're looking for — a way to set yourself apart from the competition with customer service," 
says Whaley. "That makes the difference between getting the next referral and not getting it."
Ward agrees, noting you should report back to the referring physician about their patient as quickly 
as possible — never letting the patient get back to the referring physician before you do. It's also 
good form to assist the referring physician with any paperwork you might share, such as writing all 
of the prescriptions for your treatment and leaving them in the patient's chart.

Patient referrals
Physicians, though, aren't the only ones who can help deliver new business. Satisfied patients can 
also be a significant source of referrals. Where possible, says Ward, incentivize your existing patients 
to tell friends and family about your practice by offering discounts on out-of-pocket elective 
procedures or office products like physical therapy equipment. At the very least, send them a 
thank-you note. Ward recommends distributing a practice newsletter to create buzz. "Send 
interesting, valuable content that they might pass along to their friends, like a story about the five 
health benefits of red wine, for example. Not a news flash that you just hired a new nurse."
As hospitals and health insurers increasingly dictate which providers patients must see, practices 
that hope to build their referral base will need to become more proactive. Those that cultivate 
relationships with referral sources accommodate the needs of other practices, and make customer 
service a priority, says Ward, will win the repeat referral every time.
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