

Cultivate Relationships to Grow Your Practice

At the beginning of their careers, physicians have to “grow a practice.” Whether solo or employed, they must find enough patients to cover practice expenses. To do so, it is necessary to cultivate relationships with all “customers”: patients (both current and potential), other physicians, health plans, and employers. In order to tailor an approach and build relationships, you need to understand the differing interests of each group.

- Patients – The most common and powerful factor influencing patients’ selection of physicians is a recommendation from friends or family. Word-of-mouth “advertising” is unbeatable, and the primary means of triggering it is to provide efficient, quality care to your current patients, a friendly atmosphere, and service with a smile.
- Health Professionals – Physicians as well as other health professionals, such as nurse practitioners, physical therapists, pharmacists, and nutritionists, are also important parts of your referral network. Referrals are critical toward maintaining a steady stream of new patients into your practice.
- Health plans – These cost conscious middlemen, who pay for patients’ medical services out of premiums received from employers, must make a profit from the spread between these two figures yet ensure quality providers are in their network. Being listed in provider directories opens the door to potential patients but to do so you must be conscious of the quality and mix of services that you provide.
- Employers – Employers offer access to potential patients. If you make yourself known and respected to employers, then you increase the likelihood that employees will select you as their physician.

CPII’s “Marketing Manual for Internal Medicine Practices” offers guidance on marketing to all these “customer” groups.

Practice Visibility

If a medical practice is to grow, it must become known in the community. Building relationships is key in developing the practice, but sometimes that is not enough. Consider traditional advertising mechanisms, making yourself more visible in the community, and expanding your services in order to attract additional patients. Each of these techniques also has the effect of stimulating more discussion of your practice and thus multiplying the opportunities for your patients to make (hopefully) favorable comments about you.

- Community involvement is an easy way to get your name and face known and respected. This applies both to you as well as your staff.
- Advertising in the yellow pages still ranks as the second most-common way to choose a physician (#1, of course, is word of mouth).
- Direct mail, such as post cards or letters announcing a new service or a new provider, is a great way to promote your practice.

Practice Web Site

One of the best means of presenting yourself to potential patients is a web site. Potential patients are more comfortable researching a potential provider via a web site than visiting the provider's office to ask questions. It is important that the web site effectively communicate the style and substance of the practice. Key topics a practice site should cover include:

- Services offered
- Personal and staff qualifications
- Insurance plans accepted
- Directions to the practice (preferably showing a map)
- Frequently Asked Questions
- News/Newsletter

Keeping Patients

Having attracted patients to your practice, you now enter the "gardening" phase. Cultivating an on-going relationship with each of your patients is up to you and your staff. CPII's Marketing Manual offers specific techniques, but where we recommend good patient communications and large applications of "TLC."

For more information from the "Marketing Manual for Internal Medicine Practices," College members may download the full text free from CPII's web site at http://www.acponline.org/running_practice/practice_management/tools/