

MARKETING YOUR MEDICAL PRACTICE

PART VI

Publications

Publications are a well-established and proven technique for communicating with the various sectors of the public. Three types of publications can be considered: practice information brochures, practice newsletters and information leaflets about the field of practice, e.g. pathology, dermatology, or ophthalmology.

Practice information brochures

Practice information brochures are especially useful for new and potential patients, particularly in the case of a group practice offering a comprehensive range of services. They can convey succinctly what the practice is and does and what its members stand for. However, they take a great deal more time to compile and produce than most people would imagine. The major obstacle is reaching agreement within the practice as to what should and should not go in, and how the practice's services should be explained.

Design and quality of the booklet are obviously of considerable significance, and it is advisable to use the services of professional designers, especially for the first printing, as this can require a significant outlay. Over-elaboration is likely to be as counterproductive as a 'cheap and nasty' publication. Subsequent updating could be done in-house.

In summary, a good brochure must be literate, honest, visually attractive and reflect the image that the practice wants to project. It should also be up to date. The average life of a brochure is about 2 years. That is not to say that major changes will be needed thereafter. Most of the copy can be retained with adjustments where necessary, e.g. changes in personnel, services offered, new premises.

Checklist of actions for brochure development

- Identify the target audiences, e.g. patients, potential patients, special interest groups, educational bodies.
- How will it be used? (General mailing, in response to inquiries only, available on request as well as in waiting room displays.)
- Prepare a detailed brief on content and design.
- Decide whether to write the booklet in-house or to appoint a professional.
- If work is to be done by an external company, insist on firm quotations and examine examples of work done for other service providers.
- The brochure should include information such as services offered, special expertise, resources, facilities, fees and payment arrangements, grievance procedures, details on the





members of the practice, location, consultation hours and emergency contact numbers.

- The message must have impact and relevance. Each word must be carefully considered. The description of the practice and the benefits it offers can convey a permanent mental image. The information must be easily comprehensible.
- Test the copy and design on a typical reader. Is it patient centred?
- Keep a supply in the reception area.
- Include it with billings at least once a year.
- Display and distribute in appropriate outlets.

Newsletters

Newsletters are useful and productive tools for keeping in touch with patients, projecting the image of the practice as caring and approachable, and encouraging patients to adopt preventive measures. They can be produced relatively inexpensively on personal computers and laser printers or can be e-mailed to patients. Once again, it is advisable at the time of the first issue to obtain professional advice and a standard design. Well-written and attractive newsletters can offer remarkable marketing rewards. They highlight the practice, and give patients timely information, satisfy their interest in 'learning' more and enable the practice to explain any additional services provided.

Nevertheless, no one reads newsletters that contain little or nothing to which they can relate. What could be a highly cost-effective tool can be a counterproductive method of communication. To ensure that this does not happen, an occasional questionnaire to patients about the newsletter will rapidly reveal what is read and what interests them.

Medicine is an area where there is always a great deal to report. Comments on new forms of treatment for common diseases and ailments can easily be adapted from the professional press in the same way that newspapers 'popularise' scientific issues for their lay readers. Take advantage of 'seasonal' conditions, e.g. allergies and influenza. These can provide a constant source of real news for sufferers, their families and friends. In this way a newsletter gets networked and conveys the message that the practice is not only concerned with treating the sick, but also for helping them take care of their own health.

This is the last in the series of modules on marketing your practice. Watch out for more practice management articles from the Foundation for Professional Development in the new year.

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