

Doctor's Digest Podcast: Marketing for the Primary Care Physician "Why you need to market your practice"

Hello and welcome to this new series of podcasts brought to you by the publishers of *Doctor's Digest*, bridging the gap between the business of medicine and the practice of medicine, with single-topic manuals that provide practical solutions from the experts. Support for this program comes from McNeil Pediatrics, division of Ortho-McNeil-Janssen Pharmaceuticals.

The primary care practice environment has changed dramatically in recent years as patients have become better informed and feel more empowered to take charge of their healthcare. In addition, the impact of tough economic times on patients' coverage makes it more important than ever for you to market your services. Many doctors not only think they don't have to market themselves; they think it's somehow inappropriate for the profession. But as Patrick Buckley, president and CEO of PB Healthcare Business Solutions in Wisconsin, and author of *Physician Entrepreneurs*, says, that's just not the case: "The market is changing. All of a sudden you're going to get up in the morning and say, 'A third of my patients are going to Walgreens. How did this happen?'"

Today very few people would feel that physicians are out of line by treating their practices as a business even though it may take some doctors a little time to get comfortable with the idea. Times have changed, and doctors need to understand that it's not only okay, it's imperative to consider their marketing options. Patients have no problem with doctors going online; in fact, that's where they themselves go for health information. And there's nothing wrong with sharing public health information with the press, or introducing your newest employee with a postcard mailing. In this new reality of practicing medicine, you first have to figure out how to make the specific marketing moves that fit your style, your budget, and your goals.

Certainly you have plenty of options. Dr. Neil Baum, a New Orleans urologist and author of *Marketing Your Clinical Practice*, points to the wide range of marketing tools that doctors are now using. "The better [marketed] practices are thinking well past Yellow Pages ads and going online with interactive Websites loaded with information," he says. They're using online resources and social networking tools that didn't exist just a few years ago.

Once you decide to do some marketing, how do you start? You create a marketing plan. And your first step toward that plan is to make certain that you understand your practice's situation as well as you think you do. Use anonymous questionnaires or focus groups to survey your current patients about what they like and don't like about your practice, and what they would suggest for improvements. Experts have found that there's often a surprising disconnect between what patients really want and what their doctors *think* they want. Your questionnaire should be short, specific, and easy to answer. Use a combination of open-ended questions and questions that rank your services on a one-to-five scale. Focus your questions on your practice's performance in three areas that are known to be patient hot buttons nationwide: (a) the quality of the service you provide, (b) the accessibility of healthcare providers, and (c) the degree to which patients are treated with courtesy. Prepare to be surprised by their responses. Then, once you see your practice as your patients do, you'll be ready to make some important changes that will better meet their healthcare needs. And that, after all, is what marketing your practice is all about.