

Doctor's Digest Podcast: Marketing for the Primary Care Physician "Your practice as a 'brand'"

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.

Once you've made up your mind to start marketing your primary care practice, you need to think about what your practice represents as a "brand." Put simply, your "brand" is your practice's personality, and it reflects how you will describe your practice to current and future patients. It's the thread that forms the basis of your message and permeates everything you will do to market yourself.

First, ask yourself: "How do I want my practice to be known in the patient community—as warm and caring, or cool and clinical, or maybe some combination of both?" David Miller, a partner at Stoke, a brand-consulting firm in Seattle, recommends that you conduct an "experience audit," an assessment of what it's really like to be a patient in your practice. Make sure the image you want fits the reality of your practice. For example, if you think you want to position your brand as a practice that puts patient needs first, you might observe that all the parking spots closest to your clinic entrance are reserved for physicians—hardly a case of putting patient needs first!

Is your practice relaxed? Aloof? Engaging? Conservative? Nurturing? Once you've found the right description of your practice's personality, figure out a way to express that personality in a short descriptive phrase that will appear in every marketing tool you use. The phrase should have a little emotion in it; instead of saying, "We provide good patient care," which is pretty flat, try "We offer timely and compassionate care to your entire family."

Just be sure that your brand description is true to who you really are and not just who you'd like to be. Mr. Miller asks, "Can a shy, retiring, technically oriented doctor make a promise to offer engaged, personal health planning?" Patients will quickly know if your brand description doesn't match your personality; if that happens, your marketing will fail.

For creative inspiration, visit the Websites of other practices in your community. See what works and what doesn't. One Oregon physician, who designed her practice with patient input, is folksy and friendly. She makes her own highly personal biography available on line, illustrated with photos from her childhood. Her Website design is colorful, casual, and handcrafted. These details suggest that she will be as hands-on with patients as she is with the design of her Website. That may not be your style, and that's why your marketing message needs to reflect your own personality—which is to say, your own brand.

How do you know your brand message is going to work for you? Test it with your patients. Come up with a number of messages, then test each one against the others to find out which one resonates best with your target audience. Ask your patients what each message means to them—whether it motivates them—whether it confuses them.

Once you have decided on your brand message, how do you use it? It should appear on everything that represents your practice, including your logo, letterhead, signage, Website, e-mail signatures, patient forms, brochures, Yellow Pages and other ads, and even your staff apparel. Happy branding!