

Are You Afraid of Going to the Doctor? You Shouldn't Be

This article presents field-tested tactics on effectively engaging physicians in your organization's marketing efforts.

By Alan Shoebridge

Most healthcare marketers

spend entire careers trying to convince people to overcome their fears, find a doctor, and schedule checkups before serious health problems begin. Yet when it comes to maintaining the health of our marketing efforts, a physician is often the last person we want to seek out and engage for input on strategy or tactics.

Some of us enjoy an easy, reciprocal relationship with physicians, yet too many seem to struggle to stay in—or ever find—that sweet spot of communication. This article will start with the easy steps and work up to the more advanced strategies for building bridges and mending fences with what just might be your most important stakeholder group.

Keep Calm and Carry On

Marketers often get pulled into meetings or other interactions with physicians who are upset about a perceived lack of marketing for their latest research grant or surgical procedure, or who simply want to vent about a competitor's new billboard. No matter how contentious that first encounter is, stay calm and be professional. It's hard for most people to remain confrontational when you approach them with a friendly, welcoming demeanor. Respectfully listen to the physician's concerns and choose with care what you decide to push back on. Ask yourself if you're disputing a statement because it's incorrect, or because you just didn't appreciate the tone in which it was presented.

Physicians can possess strong opinions on subjects outside of medicine, including marketing. Some physicians believe that marketing is easy and assume they could do your job if they had a few extra minutes each day. Instead of getting defensive, quickly move past these slights and follow my next points to establish your credibility. As you'll see, it starts with knowing your audience and which types of information they value.

Arm Yourself with the Facts

Most physicians value information backed by demonstrable facts. Unfortunately, marketing hasn't always been an evidence-based discipline. That's changing somewhat with our profession's shift to online tactics that are more measurable, but much of what we do remains more art than science. Here are a few things that you should know when explaining your marketing strategies to physicians.

- **The effectiveness of marketing tactics.** Explain what works, what doesn't, and what you are still figuring out. For instance, if direct mail works better than a billboard, and you're recommending that strategy for a campaign, explain why with results from past campaigns.
- **Your market share data.** Be prepared to say where your organization ranks in your service area for key service lines.
- **Public awareness of your brand position in the market.** Discuss where your organization stands and how advertising and branding campaigns have worked (or not) for other healthcare systems.
- **How consumers make decisions.** Do you know how many of your patients choose specialists through physician referrals versus advertising? If you don't, how will you deflect a request for a TV ad to promote a rarely used, specialty surgical procedure? I recommend outlining patient pathways to specialty care procedures. Providence's research has consistently shown that more than 75 percent of patients are referred to specialty care from a primary care provider. I've used that data to help redirect consumer marketing requests and instead focus on physician referral efforts.

Admittedly, obtaining some of this information isn't easy and may require funding. However, much of it can be gathered for free online with a bit of digging. Ideally, you should consider allocating funding to

conduct market research at least every other year; doing so will save you money in the long run by giving you data with which to push back on requests.

Create Proactive Engagement Opportunities

Here is where the going gets more challenging. None of the following strategies are actually difficult, but they require shifting from a reactive to proactive mindset. Instead of waiting for physicians to come to you with requests or complaints, create outlets for their energy and interest. Here are a few proven ideas that have worked.

- **Conduct an annual online survey of your physicians.** Ask what marketing tactics they respond to, what they think of your website, how they make referrals, etc. Include several operational questions that would be of value to your business partners, such as the ease of using your EMR or how well employed primary care providers are working with employed specialists. Share these results and use them to inform your marketing plans. All you need to begin this effort is an email address list for your physicians, buy-in from your leadership, and access to a simple online survey tool—many of which are available for free. Expect about a 20 to 30 percent response rate, which will give you a strong, statistically valid sample.
- **Create a physician marketing advisory committee.** The most important word here is "advisory"—you're not giving up autonomy or asking to be led. Instead, you're requesting input on prioritization, sharing your marketing plans, providing a forum for ideas, and identifying potential supporters. Holding meetings or sending email updates quarterly is ideal, but even annually would be a good first step. How did we get started at Providence? I simply added a question to our existing physician survey asking about interest in joining



a group to talk about marketing. I also directly invited specific physicians who had expressed an interest in marketing.

- **Take your show on the road.** Look for opportunities to get in front of physicians and program leaders to highlight your marketing efforts. Explain how and why you are pursuing specific strategies. This helps head off surprises and misunderstandings. Sharing survey results that provide insights into key consumer, physician, or patient groups offers a good entry point.
- **Be transparent.** If you have limited budget and staffing, inform key physicians and leaders about the challenges that you are facing. Don't allow people to assume you aren't pursuing certain tactics or strategies due to a lack of ability or knowledge. Most importantly, use your marketing skills to promote your team's successes. If you have great results from a campaign, share them.

Get to Know Your Business, Personally

It's a common expectation in almost all industries—except, all too often, health-care—that marketers should actually use the products they promote. The chief marketing

officer for Samsung doesn't use an iPhone, nor does the chief marketing officer at Ford Motor Co. drive a Toyota. Here are just a few things you should consider.

- **Getting care from a doctor in your organization.** If you don't use a physician that is part of your healthcare system, especially if it includes an employed physician group, how can you truly understand the patient experience? If it's tough to schedule an appointment or the patient portal is difficult to use, shouldn't you be aware of those problems?
- **Shadow a physician.** One of my most rewarding and enlightening professional experiences was spending time with a doctor as she saw patients. It was fascinating to listen in on the interactions and neutrally observe each patient visit. Doing so significantly improved my understanding of what a physician's average day is like and helped me relate to the challenges they face in providing care.
- **Visit your hospitals and clinics.** It is easy to become disconnected from the care our organizations provide, especially for those whose offices aren't located on hospital campuses. Make an effort at least once a quarter to spend a day observing and learning.

What Do Doctors Think? Ask Them.

Providence annually invites more than 650 physicians to share their thoughts about communications, marketing, and referrals. This email survey takes less than 10 minutes to complete, yet provides a wealth of information for the marketing team. Here are a few insights from the most recent survey, completed by 176 physicians:

- Top drivers for making referrals from one provider to another are impressions of quality, past experience, professional reputation, and the ease of communicating with office staff.
- 86 percent of those surveyed prefer email to receive general news and information about Providence. This was down seven points from two years prior.
- 18 percent stated a preference for direct mail—a 16-point jump from the previous survey, indicating that the volume of email is getting extremely difficult to manage.
- Only 20 percent said they would be willing to take part in social media.
- 56 percent chose Google as their top website to get medical news.

Moving from Words to Actions

Taking a proactive approach to working with physicians is a crucial aspect to having a well-rounded, strategically focused marketing plan. Engaging your physicians might even lower your blood pressure and improve your health. As we tell prospective patients: Schedule an appointment with your doctor today!

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