

Good Judgment, Better Marketing

By Victoria Houghton

In 1977, John Bates and Van O'Steen, two eager lawyers from Arizona, placed an ad in a local newspaper indicating that they offered "legal services at very reasonable fees." In doing so, these new lawyers violated their state law prohibiting lawyers and healthcare professionals from advertising. Facing suspension, the lawyers appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, and the state law was overturned, allowing them to freely advertise their services on the grounds that marketing would better educate the public about its rights to legal services.

"One of the great tragedies of that decision was that it never introduced the issue of good judgment in marketing," notes Richard E. Vincent, DC, former president of the Federation of Chiropractic Licensing Boards.

Yet experts agree that making the right marketing choices and exercising good judgment are integral to success and long-term survival in business. "If you do unethical things, you will kill your business fast. It takes a long time to climb out of that pit if you fall in," says Shel Horowitz, author of *Principled Profit: Marketing That Puts People First*.

At the end of the day, there is nothing left but the character and integrity of the individual doctor to bring patients through the door, and keep them coming back.

Marketing by the Book

When it comes to health care and patients, most marketing practices that cross ethical boundaries will

also cross legal boundaries, notes Steven Baker, DC, a member of the Arizona Board of Chiropractic Examiners. "All states have the open-ended statute that says you will practice either ethically or according to recognized standards," he says. "You have to tell the whole truth, meaning you can't leave things unsaid and you can't be misleading."

So consulting your state's chiropractic practice act—and any other state or local laws relevant to business marketing—is a good first step in determining what is, and is not, permissible. It's also good to do a gut-check now and then, says Dr. Baker. "Ask yourself how you would feel about your marketing if your mother was the consumer?"

Target Your Audience

The success of all forms of marketing depends largely on who is at the receiving end. "A lot of people waste money marketing to people who would never be their market," says Horowitz, whose father, a chiropractor, practiced in New York City for almost 30 years. "You must ask yourself: Who is the likely market? If you just advertise to a general audience on a cable channel, 80 percent or 90 percent of the people you advertise to don't want or don't think they need your services."

Instead, "figure out who your best clients are, who knows them, what they read, what they watch, where they go, what they listen to," he explains. Then tailor your marketing strategy based on this information.

Educate the Consumer

Once you know your parameters and your audience, the next step is determining your approach. Kelly Robbins,

CEO of A Marketing Connection, a healthcare marketing firm in Broomfield, Colo., believes the focus of chiropractors' marketing should always be education. "A lot of patients go to a chiropractor to alleviate a specific complaint, but they quit coming in once they feel better. What you want to do is teach them how you can help their pain, as well as what you can do regarding their overall health."

Robbins advises doctors to convey their message using a variety of traditional media, such as newsletters and postcards. She also recommends presenting educational seminars and participating in health fairs. "You should be in the forefront of the minds of both existing and prospective patients every two weeks or so," she says. "Offer tons of tips and advice. Your newsletter should be at least 80 percent educational."

Horowitz agrees that forgoing hype for an educational message is smart when marketing to today's informed consumer. "People want to be treated like they are intelligent and thoughtful," he says.

Most people are over-marketed to, so—especially when it comes to your existing patients—be subtle and pleasant in your marketing messages, Horowitz advises. "The louder you scream [with aggressive marketing such as inflated claims or scare tactics], the more people will screen you out."

Try New Technology

DCs should also consider taking the information used in their traditional marketing materials and repurposing it with a trendy spin on the Internet, says Robbins. "The vast majority of people will go to the Internet first if they have a health-related question, so place any press releases, newsletters or articles that you have written on your practice's Web site and a blog."

Another option is to create and post a podcast on your Web site. "People are very busy, so podcasts allow the patient to download and listen to your information on the go," Robbins notes.

Horowitz agrees that the Internet is a great tool, but says you still have to be strategic to ensure that people find your site. "Chiropractic tends toward a local clientele, so

you have to have local Internet strategies. Generally your radius will be 30 to 50 miles around your business," he explains. So, for example, if your town has an official Web site, try to get the link to your clinic included on it. Having a link on the local Chamber of Commerce Web site, or the sites of nearby businesses, is another good idea.

Consider the relevance of your content to Internet searches, as well. "People are very focused in their searches online," says Horowitz. So it's a good idea to list somewhere on your site all the towns and communities surrounding your practice, so that people searching for a DC in those areas will bring up your site, too. For the same reason, consider listing the names of nearby businesses and other providers that you refer to on your site.

The Internet offers new ways to reach out and market to other healthcare professionals. Doctors of chiropractic can join e-mail listservs or post messages on blogs and other online networking venues to discuss healthcare issues and potentially attract referrals.

One of the newest professional networking options is The Doctor's Channel (www.thedoctorschannel.com), an information Web site known as the "You Tube for Doctors," which enables healthcare professionals to discuss the latest research via one- to two-minute videos.

"Everything on the site is evidence based," says Michael Banks, MD, co-founder of The Doctor's Channel. "By participating, doctors of chiropractic can present and learn about data and techniques, but it will also raise their profile among other doctors as well as patients who may be searching the site for answers."

Use Available Evidence

Today chiropractors are competing in a world where research rules—so why not use that to your advantage when marketing your practice. "We're living by the principles that the medical community is living by, and that's not a negative thing; we just need to utilize evidence-based research," says Charles Herring, DC, president of the Foundation for Chiropractic Education and Research (FCER). "When you practice in an

evidence-based manner, insurance companies, attorneys, courts and others who would refer to you—such as medical practitioners—will look at you differently.”

When Dr. Herring started practicing 39 years ago, there was very little research on chiropractic available to share with others. “I had to grow into the evidence-based model,” he said. “When I started using research, other practitioners started to accept me more. Now I estimate that 80 percent to 85 percent of my practice is made up of medical referrals.”

However, Dr. Herring says the best outcome of sharing evidence in his practice has been his patients’ increased confidence in his abilities. “Patients love the fact that you practice in an evidence-based fashion. Sit down with them and show them the evidence, and tell them that, together, you’re going to decide the best approach,” says Dr. Herring. “When they see that you’ve done your homework, they will leave the office and share their experience with their family and friends.”

With thousands of research articles available, it can be difficult to determine what’s worth sharing. FCER offers a program, called DC Consult, which provides condition reviews and research for the busy clinician. “This Web site helps doctors easily find research and apply it to their practice without having to dig through thousands of articles that may or may not be reputable and objective,” says Dr. Herring. “It also allows you to print a handout for your patients.”

Nurture Relationships

While the tools and technology for marketing chiropractic services have expanded tremendously, DCs should not overlook the simpler—and, at the same time, some of the most ethical and effective—strategies that have stood the test of time: community involvement and good communication.

According to Dr. Vincent, just by being an active community member—coaching a children’s sports team, serving on a board, volunteering, etc.—doctors can introduce themselves, and what they do, to countless potential patients.

The principle behind developing relationships works the same in the clinic. “My office doesn’t spend a lot of time on our promotional materials,” says Scott Bautch, DC, who runs a successful group of practices in Wausau, Wis. “We focus more on the whole experience with patients and getting to know them better. I work on understanding what makes people tick.”

“People don’t want to come into an environment that makes them feel like every other environment,” Dr. Bautch explains. “Make them feel special. I always ask questions such as, ‘How is your pain affecting your life? What do you want to change? What’s better today?’”

Moreover, Dennis Perman, DC, creator of The Masters Circle, a practice management firm that focuses on “identity-based” marketing, recommends taking time to understand how individual patients communicate and relate, which can ultimately enhance a DC’s ability to build strong doctor-patient relationships. This process, he explains, involves determining a patient’s communication style, personality style and their “meta-program” or general behavior. For example, he says, “Observe their tempo, volume and word choice, and reflect them [in your own way of communicating] to make them feel comfortable.”

Nurturing your existing customer base is one of the best marketing choices any business owner can make, agrees Horowitz. “If you go for the fast sale and provide services [your patients] don’t need and can’t pay for, they won’t come back and they will actively discourage referrals.” He also points out that it costs much more to bring in a new customer than it does to work with existing customers for future business and referrals.

Even forging relationships with other chiropractors—who you would normally consider competitors—can produce unexpected marketing opportunities, says Horowitz. He cites one example of this in his town where florists banded together to buy a large ad in the local newspaper targeting their common enemy: grocery stores that sell flowers. “You don’t buy your groceries at a florist,” the ad stated, “so why buy your flowers from a grocer?” By uniting, the florists were able to buy an ad that, alone, none of them could afford, and to send a message to the community that would benefit all of them.

“The most effective form of marketing is through building relationships,” Dr. Vincent reiterates. “This strategy is inexpensive but requires that doctors be authentic. The ultimate objective of relationship marketing is to build trust and respect. Once that happens, a practice will grow beyond all expectations.”

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