

The Art of Woo
By Mike Scott

Healthcare organizations that keep and attract the best physicians can see their efforts pay off in the long run.

The previous issue of For the Record http://www.fortherecordmag.com/ftm_coverstory.shtml analyzed the ways healthcare systems are targeting patients through marketing campaigns. However, that's just one phase of an effective public relations program. In today's competitive industry, where a health system is defined by its ambassadors in the operating room, it is also becoming increasingly important to market to on-staff and potential physicians.

Why is this necessary? A general rule of marketing is that it costs up to 25% less in terms of marketing dollars to keep an existing client than to find a new one. The same is true with a health system's physicians. Constant communication with existing physicians is required to ensure they understand the organization's goals and direction. In essence, physicians should be treated as customers. It is beneficial to know when a physician is unhappy before he or she leaves so that preventive action can be taken.

"It's about building relationships with physicians," says Fred M. DeGrandis, CEO of Cleveland Clinic Health System, Western Region. "In my view, retaining doctors is more important than recruiting them."

Marketing to outside physicians can become more complicated, particularly if they have a longstanding relationship with a competing health system or hospital. According to industry insiders, marketing departments should realize that any campaign they develop for patients—eg, radio or television spots, direct mail brochures, community events—will also be seen by other physicians.

Keeping your current physicians happy is a huge challenge and poses a no-win situation, according to Pauline T. Mayer, president of PTM Healthcare Marketing, Inc., a healthcare marketing communications firm in Smithtown, N.Y. Marketing staffs or consultants will need to determine which physicians have programs that require focused marketing efforts. "Within most systems, there is very limited manpower, so you have to decide who has a program worth promoting," says Mayer.

Determining which programs merit special attention requires extensive research, Mayer says. For example, a hospital needs to know the specialty needs of its community. It makes little sense to duplicate a program that's already been established at a nearby system. "Once you know what your community's needs are and what may differentiate (a physician and his or her specialty), then you focus extensive public relations, advertising, and other campaigns on that practice," Mayer says.

Of course, the physician must “buy in” to the idea of extensive marketing and be willing to participate in the planning. At the same time, care should be taken in choosing outside advertising or public relations agencies so that an effective message is developed.

A comprehensive physician referral program—a service that is a requirement in today’s healthcare landscape—should be in place as well. One additional service to consider is organizing one or more physician retreats per year, perhaps even grouped together by specialty. This provides physicians within a system or hospital with an open forum to discuss important issues. Hospital administrators and marketing staff can serve as moderators to get a better feel for the staff’s current attitudes and concerns. Holding these seminars is a relatively inexpensive option. Some research and presentation preparation will be needed, but conference rooms should be readily available within the system, so invitations, phone calls, information packets, and refreshments should be the only costs involved.

The Danville (Va.) Regional Health System (DRHS) has engaged in an ongoing proactive campaign to appeal to both its own physicians and potential physicians who may be interested in becoming affiliated with the organization. Danville has two full-time employees who are responsible for both physician retention and physician recruitment. The mission statement for the system’s physician services department lays out exactly how important these marketing efforts are:

“Our mission is to provide comprehensive support services to physicians. Whether physicians have recently relocated to the area or have been practicing in Danville for years, our staff is dedicated to improving the quality of their experience at Danville Regional Health System.

“As a liaison between Danville Regional Health System and the medical staff, Physician Services is the best place for physicians to find the answers to questions regarding their practices.”

The process for physician recruitment is ongoing. DRHS searches for qualified physicians by maintaining a national database, attending meetings, advertising, utilizing the Internet, and mailing information to residents and practicing physicians nationwide. Once physician candidates are identified, customized itineraries are developed and visits are coordinated to ensure a positive experience for the visiting physicians and their families.

“We initiate contact with a new physician candidate in an attempt to get them hooked into the community,” says Cathy Shelton, physician retention manager for DRHS. “We’ll send them issues of local newspapers and a welcome basket if they are visiting the facility as an extra way of reaching out.”

In addition to those perks, the department provides recruited physicians with a packet on the Danville region that includes everything from community opportunities and standard-of-living information to a list of the area’s largest employers and reports on the quality of its schools. In short, the staff helps to make new physicians and their families feel at home.

This particularly helps with retention efforts, Shelton says. As part of her department's proactive program, new physicians are given a one-on-one tour on his or her first day to meet various coworkers, quarterly breakfasts or lunches with other first-year physicians to ensure their needs are being met, and an annual "new physician" dinner.

Another successful event is the Physician Spouse Luncheon, where spouses of new physicians can meet to share experiences and get to know each other. Most of these families have moved into the area from outside Virginia and often find mutual interests or characteristics—such as children of the same age—that lead to close friendships. "In a lot of cases, you'll hear about spouses having their kids join the same play groups or organize clubs together," Shelton notes. "We'll take time to summarize the interests of the spouses and physicians with a casual luncheon or cocktail party."

DRHS also works with system physicians to help them grow their own practice. In conjunction with the physician services department, physicians receive assistance on expanding their patient bases through marketing and networking initiatives. Market analysis studies are performed, and physicians can receive payor mix data and trends in local healthcare, which help to identify opportunities for growth.

On the physician recruitment side, healthcare marketers should develop a budget that will provide the resources needed to have a successful recruitment program, according to Susan Escue, physician recruitment manager. "It takes a lot of time and effort to recruit a physician," Escue explains. "You have to do a lot of sourcing to identify a candidate. Once you identify a candidate, then you have to interview the candidates—and this includes itineraries for both the physician and the spouse."

In addition to those tasks, a good physician recruitment department will assist incoming doctors and their families with finding a home or whatever they need, says Escue. "If assisting a private practice on your medical staff with recruitment, be sure to keep communication open between the candidates and the group," she adds. "Be sensitive to their needs and time."

The University of Michigan Health System in Ann Arbor has developed a comprehensive Faculty Satisfaction Survey that has provided detailed results to help the physician retention process. One of the factors that is unique to the University of Michigan Health System is the fact that the competition for faculty physicians is perhaps even more stiff than the battle for practicing physicians. "You could write an entirely different article on that topic because that's where we find the competition is particularly intense," says University of Michigan Health System spokeswoman Kara Gavin.

The university actively recruits physicians for the dual role of physician/faculty member at the medical school, so marketers play up the image of Ann Arbor as a leading high-tech and healthcare community. "There are a lot of activities we engage in, but what we really want to get across is that we willingly and actively promote the physician's specialty throughout the local, national, and worldwide communities," says Gavin. "The reach that we have as one of the world's top medical systems really makes a difference."

Incentives, reputation of the health system, and location are obvious differentiating factors, but providing faculty physicians with additional services is warranted, says Gavin.

She adds that they try to market the health system as well as the university, which has a sterling reputation itself. This relationship allows physicians a better opportunity to get published, which in turn raises that physician's profile in both an academic and a medical setting.

“When we took a pulse of our community of physicians, we found that some of these smaller factors—aside from salary—meant just as much to the individuals,” says Gavin. Mayer says marketers should get to know what a physician's average day is like and how his or her practice is run. She often spends one day or more at a client's practice, familiarizing herself with staff responsibilities and working with the physician(s) on what some of their logistical strengths and weaknesses may be. In other words, a marketer should be as dedicated to a physician's practice as those physicians are to their patients.

“You need to have a passion for healthcare and understand the issues affecting it, such as reimbursements getting tighter,” says Mayer.

DeGrandis agrees. Cleveland Clinic Health System regularly sends marketing staff, nurses, and other healthcare professionals to physician offices to ensure that the practice's needs are being met and that it is receiving information about news within the system. In addition, Cleveland Clinic Health System will bring in speakers and sponsor luncheons at physician offices a few times per year. DeGrandis says this builds trust, keeps communication lines open, and encourages the team concept.

“There's nothing that replaces face-to-face communication between leaders and the medical staff,” he says. “We focus a lot of our attention on the office staff because, in essence, they are one of the primary customers.” Even within systems and hospitals that may have small budgets and staff, such a program is doable and recommended, says DeGrandis. “It may require deploying your staff in a different way, but we have found that it really does help retention,” he maintains.

Another idea to help retain physicians is to distribute weekly or biweekly e-mail that covers news and events going on at the health system. There are other means to keep physicians content. For example, DeGrandis notes that physicians who are part of Cleveland Clinic Health System and meet certain criteria can use the world-renowned Cleveland Clinic brand name in their personal advertisements and brochures.

At the end of the day, physicians need to realize and be reminded of their value to a healthcare organization. Appreciation for their work should be noted, even if it is a simple act such as recognizing them in a community newsletter.

“Applauding your medical staff is critical,” says Mayer. “If you make them feel good about themselves and the system they are with, chances are they will be happy with that relationship.”

Shelton agrees. She says the time commitments placed on physicians could make it difficult for their families to adjust to a new area and lifestyle, so part of her department's goal is to introduce that family to the Danville community. It comes down to treating everyone as a separate person or family rather than just another doctor or spouse.

“Our efforts in marketing to physicians have been effective because you can see that the families have built relationships with others within the organization, so in essence, they have a second family here and are comfortable with their mom or dad spending time here,” she says.

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