Marketing the Community Oncology Practice

Increasing competition and declining reimbursements are compelling reasons to market a medical practice. Yet to community oncologists who depend strictly on referrals, marketing may seem an unnecessary expense. “Yes, referring physicians may tell patients you’re the best,” says Kim Woofter, practice administrator for Michiana Hematology Oncology (MHO), a 15-physician practice that serves North Central Indiana and Southwestern Michigan from seven locations. “But today’s well-informed consumers will check you out online and ask their friends and neighbors.”

Having been trained in evidence-based medicine, physicians may equate the success of a marketing plan with an increased number of new patients. Yet, physicians may also want to consider the value of name recognition and minimal out-migration of established patients. “The care physicians provide speaks to their actual quality,” says Woofter. “Packaging yourself attractively speaks to your perceived quality, and consumers feel they are getting something better.”

MHO employs a marketing firm to help brand their practice. The goal is to imprint it in the public’s mind through repeated, consistent messages. Two new MHO facilities housed in hospital centers raised the question of how to maintain their brand. “I liken it to the Intel concept,” says Woofter. “A successful branding of our practice makes us synonymous with quality regardless of location.”

A marketing firm may not be able to grasp every nuance of the individual practice. Therefore, it’s important to choose one that offers a la carte options for communicating different messages within a consistent framework. Woofter advises avoiding the monthly retainer. Instead of the calendar, campaigns should revolve around an event, perhaps the arrival of a new associate, or a theme, such as the availability of big-city medicine close to home.

Advertising, an important component of marketing, can be costly. Yet unlike individuals, marketing firms can negotiate lower rates for air time and set limits on when a competitor’s ad may run. Firms can also negotiate no-cost space next to a paid newspaper ad. “We purchased a section of a monthly newspaper tab for a year for a physician’s question-and-answer column,” Woofter says. “By supplying the questions and answers, we provided the education we wanted consumers to have.”

As the liaison to her practice’s marketing firm, Woofter has learned many lessons:

- Don’t underestimate the power of radio.
- Pay attention to ad placement.
- Limit the number of physicians who are featured in any one ad campaign.
- Maintain consistency between your Web site and your overall image.

Above all, don’t hesitate to change firms when the relationship no longer works. Or, as some practices do, consider bringing marketing inhouse.

“Traditional marketing as well as the tools that measure the return on investment can be incredibly expensive,” says Frederick M. Briccetti, MD, who practices with New Hampshire Hematology-Oncology (NHOH), an 11-physician practice with five locations. A large practice by New Hampshire standards, their marketing budget nonetheless pales when compared with the large tertiary cancer centers in the region. “After going the traditional marketing route for a while, we asked ourselves how much good we were doing and then began exploring alternative ways to promote our practice,” says Briccetti.

Here are some cost-effective strategies that NHOH has used successfully and that other practices can adopt:

- **Increase community involvement.** Through an affiliation with the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, NHOH launched the “Let’s Talk” community education program to bring the Institute’s talent to local venues.
- **Pay attention to and learn from your Web site.** Shine the spotlight on what sets you apart.
- **Stay in touch with referring physicians.** Keep doctors current on your practice, direct them to your Web site, and request that they do the same for patients they refer.
- **Nurture a positive relationship with the media.** Be the go-to person when reporters want a local expert opinion on breaking cancer news.

As effective as ‘soft’ marketing strategies can be, physicians opening a new practice in a competitive area may still benefit from a traditional marketing plan. “A media person can be helpful, but remain mindful of the image you present,” says Briccetti. “Also, before outsourcing design work for your logo and written material, make sure you own the content, just in case you terminate the relationship.”

On a day-to-day basis, each member of a physician’s staff has numerous opportunities to market the practice. “Every patient is a billboard,” says John Sichel, RPH, PD, a retired marketing specialist who volunteers to help cancer centers communicate better with referring physicians. “If your receptionist is abrupt or unfriendly, you can be sure that will get back to the referring doctor.”

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