How to Choose the Right Marketing Company for Your Group Practice
(Includes a 17-point checklist)

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Selecting a marketing team is a challenge under any circumstance. There are many types of firms to choose from, and many marketers are great at selling themselves. After awhile, even though there are distinct and important differences, to the uninitiated marketers begin to “look alike.”

But not all marketing companies are equally knowledgeable, experienced, capable, committed or specialized. Frankly, just as it is hard for a patient to evaluate and compare surgeons, it is difficult for practice leadership to understand the differences between marketing companies.

So, the question is: How do you choose a company that has what it takes to help you reach your group practice’s goals?

With that in mind, here are...

**The 17 Questions to Ask Yourself About Any Organization You’re Considering to Handle Your Group Practice’s Marketing**

1. **Exactly what kind of firm are you hiring?**

   If you have been “shopping around” for marketing help, you probably have already experienced a bewildering number of choices. Let’s start by helping you understand the various options before you.

   **Individuals (employees, consultants, independent contractors).**

   Some groups want to hire a “marketing person” in house. The only challenge with that idea is that marketing (like medicine) is a world of specialists. There are strategists, graphic designers, writers, account managers, pay-per-click experts, search engine optimization specialists, programmers, practice representatives (a.k.a. salespeople, business development or physician liaisons), public relations people (aka PR, whose job it is to get free press), media buyers, trainers and more.

   You don’t need or want all these people in house. It is much more cost effective to outsource.

   Also, beware the VERY common mistake of hiring a “marketing person” and expecting them to be good at everything you need, especially different functions like sales (e.g., physician liaisons) and marketing communications. Those are two entirely different skill sets and personalities. Practices that don’t understand that often set up employees to fail because they assume a “marketing person” should be able to do all those functions.

   **Practice Management Companies**

   Group practices that employ practice management companies often turn to them for marketing help as well. The trouble is, while management companies add tremendous value in other areas, they generally do not have marketing expertise.

   **Advertising Agencies**

   Advertising agencies come in many shapes and sizes. Unless you have millions of dollars to spend, most of the national and regional firms will politely brush you off. The smaller local ones will, however, gladly take your business.

   Many advertising agencies focus on creative services, while others include media buying as well. Most are focused on “branding” and creativity, rather than results (more on that later).

   A BIG issue for you to consider is the fact that advertising agencies are just that: focused on advertising. So they will help you with messaging, branding and ads, but they stop there. Everything else is “client side.”
Marketing Companies

Marketing is much bigger than just advertising. As we teach at our healthcare marketing seminars, there are six primary marketing strategies for group practices and other healthcare organizations:

1. Doctor referral building
2. Internal marketing (patient referrals, how you answer the phones, etc.)
3. Internet marketing
4. Public Relations (including community events and free press/publicity)
5. Branding
6. Advertising

As we have just discussed, traditional advertising agencies focus solely on #5 and #6 above, whereas a true marketing company also leads the more important strategies as well.

While they are harder to find, generally you will be better served with a marketing company than an advertising agency.

To illustrate our point, we recently heard from a practice that had hired an ad agency which had successfully made the phones ring. However, the callers weren’t converting into patients. The ad agency’s response was, “Sorry, that’s not what we do. That’s a client problem.”

Wrong answer…

2. Does your marketing company specialize in healthcare?

Due to the declining economy and technological changes, many marketing firms and advertising agencies are losing their traditional clients at such an alarming rate that they are in danger of becoming extinct. As they look around for new revenue opportunities, group practices and hospitals seem like ripe targets. After all, the population is aging, there is a lot of consolidation going on and lots of doctors and hospitals seem to be spending money.

The trouble is, the healthcare industry has unique marketing considerations:

1. The stakes are extremely high. These are people’s lives we are talking about, so both emotion and intellect play huge roles in how patients react to marketing.
2. There are higher standards of ethics than any field we are aware of.
3. There are legal landmines to deal with. Agencies and marketing people unwittingly create marketing campaigns that run afoul of healthcare laws all the time.
4. Healthcare is complex, and it is easy to lose the message in technical and clinical issues that confuse or are meaningless to patients. (Patients do NOT choose healthcare providers the way your doctors would.) Worse, inexperienced firms do not have the credibility to stand up to doctors, even when their client is about to make a mistake.
5. Some marketing tactics that work well in other fields bomb when applied to healthcare, and other tactics work well in healthcare but are not found in other industries.

Potential mistakes abound, so you want a team that knows how to spot and avoid them, rather than someone who is ready and willing to learn them on your dime.
While many providers settle for firms with zero healthcare experience, your practice deserves true healthcare marketing expertise. That means experience with dozens of healthcare clients should be your minimum requirement (hundreds or thousands of past clients would be even better.)

Don’t settle for anything less.

3. **Does your marketing firm know how to successfully navigate group practice politics?**

Group practices have their own unique style of decision-making and politics.

It’s no secret that doctors can be notoriously difficult to deal with, and many believe their “smarts” translate to any field of endeavor. A group practice environment compounds that effect.

What’s more, doctors have little patience for amateurs with no healthcare experience, and they can be especially hard on marketing people. Thus, “newbies” rarely have what it takes to gain confidence and win over your most important stakeholders.

Without a deep understanding of the politics involved in a group practice, well meaning marketers will be limited in their ability to help you with your internal issues. Even assuming your doctors could be persuaded to “buy off” on someone they don’t have complete confidence in, the moment there’s a hiccup things can immediately spiral out of control.

Trust us, you don’t want that.

You need to find someone who has what it takes to command respect and trust from your doctors. You don’t want to be embarrassed.

Instead, you need someone who not only has your group’s best interest at heart, but can make you a “hero” to your practice.

(See our white paper, “The Administrator’s Guide to Convincing Skeptical Doctors on the Need For Marketing”)

4. **Do your potential marketing partners talk more about their own “creativity,” rather than how (specifically) they are going to help you achieve your goals?**

It may surprise you that many marketing people are actually frustrated artists, who’d rather be sculpting, painting or writing the great American novel. Marketing is merely their “day job” to get by. That’s fine of course, and we all love creativity.

The trouble is, because of that mindset, many marketing firms treat your budget as a vehicle for their own creative fulfillment. They judge success based upon the cleverness of the work, or whether they win the admiration of their arty friends at the local ad club’s annual awards night.

However, most medical groups want results (patients, revenues, etc.), not the chance to be an unintentional patron of the arts.

Creativity for creativity’s sake rarely adds up to marketing success. In fact, clever ads often actually confuse would-be patients, rather than motivate them to action. So never mind their creativity. (If awards are all they want to talk about, RUN.)

Your marketing firm needs to be focused on — and capable of — conceiving, developing and executing marketing strategies and tactics that will bring you the patients and/or cases you want.
5. Does your prospective marketing firm have a specific input process, thus ensuring better results and doctor buy in?

Imagine rushing to recommend treatment without first doing a history, examination and diagnosis. You don’t do it. You wouldn’t do it.

Likewise, your practice should only partner with a marketing team that has a well thought out process to do their due diligence. Depending on the situation, this could include interviews with you and your doctors, demographic analysis, competitive review, referral pattern analysis, evaluation of search-engine positioning, marketing research, media options, focus groups... and whatever else will lead to a complete understanding and the achievement of your marketing goals.

Obviously a thorough input process leads to better results once the campaign begins. However, almost as importantly, it will also make your doctors feel “heard,” and they will be much more likely to “buy in” to the program from start to finish.

6. Is the marketing company you’re considering able to add value?

Marketing is a collaborative effort. What you need, therefore, is a marketing partner and not just an “order taker.” Sure, the marketer needs to hear you and follow your requests, but what can they bring to the table besides what you are asking for?

You need a team that knows how to add value on a strategic level, such as helping you determine which patients to target, which cases to attract more of, what mistakes to avoid, when to run your marketing campaign, how the pieces fit together and so much more. Ultimately, your marketing partners shouldn’t merely ask what you want but must be able to identify what you need, keep you from making mistakes, recommend appropriate solutions and then make it all happen.

7. Do you want “a few projects,” or a long-term relationship with full support?

Put another way, were you looking for a transactional relationship where you get help with a website for example, or were you looking for a long-term partner to grow your business.

Either option is fine, so long as you and your agency are on the same page. (Though some ad agencies require long-term contracts and won’t accept “one off” projects.)

Structures vary depending upon your needs. Sometimes you should agree on a defined set of projects with payments spread out over a number of months. In other cases you should agree to an annual retainer where you are essentially “outsourcing your marketing department.” If media is involved, a good agency can negotiate media costs well enough to cover a portion or all of their fees. Finally, on long-term contracts it sometimes makes sense to build in an “out,” so that both parties have the right to cancel after a certain period.

8. Are their fees competitive and reasonable given the value added?

Cost matters. It always did. But it’s particularly important now for healthcare practices in light of their rising costs, the state of reimbursement and the uncertainty that pervades in healthcare.

So, in addition to finding out how your marketing team will engage with you, you must also know what the fees will be, and exactly what you are getting for those fees. As we mentioned at the beginning of this white paper, comparing agencies can be very difficult, and fees versus added value added is the most difficult part of the comparison.
For example, let’s say you want a new website for your practice. On the low end, there are “template do-it-yourself” sites out there that you can get for almost nothing. You could also hire a graphic designer on an hourly basis to make something you write look pretty.

Or, you can hire an agency where a team of people (artist, writer, account manager, search engine optimizer and strategist) will create a site that enables people to find you, and then compels them to call you. Perhaps you need to integrate special technologies like scheduling, or you want your website to be updated with regular blog posts.

As you can imagine, the graphic designer will seem cheap by comparison on the front end, but a website that has zero impact on your bottom line isn’t really a bargain. On the other hand, bloated budgets supporting lots of inept people aren’t good either.

So again, the issue isn’t solely cost, it is cost versus value added. So do your homework and make sure you work with people you trust, because at the end of the day, that is a big part of what you are buying.

9. Can your prospective marketing company help you determine a reasonable marketing budget based on your goals?

Group practices rarely have experience developing marketing budgets, let alone reasonable budgets that will achieve positive results. So, the firm you’re considering should have ample experience helping groups clarify and prioritize their objectives, and then work closely with them to determine a reasonable budget to achieve those objectives.

10. Do they track the success of their programs... including the return-on-investment of your marketing efforts?

Does the marketing team you’re considering set return-on-investment (ROI) goals for your marketing campaign? Or do they shrink away from any discussion of success measurement?

Be forewarned, the vast majority of ad agencies and marketing firms prefer to talk about fuzzy metrics like “number of exposures” or “awareness.”

Assuming you are looking for results, it is critical that you choose a marketing partner that:

1. Utilizes the new technologies available to track results of all your marketing expenditures. For example, by using tracking numbers, you can determine which strategies or ads are delivering calls, and even record the calls to see how your staff is handling them.

2. Sets goals based upon hard metrics like number of new patient inquiries or return on investment.

11. Whom will you be dealing with?

At the end of the day, you are really hiring people, not a company.

Who will comprise your marketing team? What are their credentials? What is their experience with practice marketing? What are their areas of particular skill and expertise?

What role will each of them play on the team? Will your lead contact disappear once you sign a contract? Are they committed to continuing education to maximize their effectiveness in pursuit of your objectives?
You’d be surprised how few marketing people are really committed to their craft. Ask them to tell you about how many conferences they have attended recently, what books they’ve read, what journals they read or how they get new relevant ideas.

Also, don’t underestimate chemistry. You will be working with these people for a long time. Do you like and trust them?

12. What is your prospective marketing company’s development process, and how will their team collaborate with you?

Always think about the partnership process itself. So, how do they work? What is their process, and how will they collaborate with you? How will they communicate and interact with your members of your team? Will they “play nice” with other vendors that may be involved?

13. Does your marketing firm focus on name awareness or direct response?

You should know there are two philosophies when it comes to advertising.

The first is “name awareness,” branding or general advertising. There, the objective is to repeat your (clever) message over and over again until eventually consumers know your name, and become more likely to call you when you have a need. The caveat is that this method takes time, patience and (usually) a lot of money.

The second school of thought is direct response, where the object is to get consumers to call you right now. It is essentially a “best practices” methodology that builds upon testing over time. Devotees follow principles that are proven to work, including benefit-oriented headlines, active voice, calls to action, offers, “you” oriented copy and dozens of other techniques.

Generally, if you want faster results (and a proven methodology that will make sense to your doctors), choose a firm with a direct response background.

14. Can this marketing firm create a compelling brand that differentiates the practice from its competitors?

That’s not to say branding is unimportant.

Competition is brutal today, and you need to come up with a clear message that gives your practice a competitive advantage.

Usually, the first step is to position you practice, by answering the question, “Why you?” The answer needs to be true, differentiating, (ideally) protectable, memorable and especially compelling.

From there, word crafters will need to refine that message into a tagline, which will serve as the baseline for your brand.

Keep in mind branding is not synonymous with your brand identity, i.e., your logo and brochure. Rather, your brand encompasses every exposure the consumer has with your practice, including how your office looks, how your staff answers the phone, how you are dressed, etc.

For more information on branding, visit http://www.healthcaresuccess.com/articles/branding.html
15. Where is your marketing firm located (but does that truly matter)?

Many practices like to work with local firms because they assume it will be easier. Certainly, it is nice when your marketer can make a face-to-face meeting in twenty minutes.

However, beware of the tradeoffs. There are 17 criteria in this report, and it would generally be unwise to dismiss all of them in favor of one criterion.

Remember that even if the marketing firm you choose is local, the vast majority of your communications will be conducted via phone and email. Obviously national firms can communicate just as easily that way, and can also travel to you when required. What’s more, new technologies like video chat and desktop sharing (like Skype, AIM, FaceTime, etc.) make face-to-face conferences almost as easy.

16. Do they possess true, broad-based skill and experience with Internet marketing?

Today, Internet-based marketing is an essential component of a well-rounded, effective marketing plan. Additionally, Internet marketing will only become more important tomorrow.

So, you want a team that knows the ropes... and well beyond just creating a compelling, marketing-savvy site. Does your prospective team understand and have experience with search-engine optimization? Pay-per-click advertising? Social media? Email marketing? Sales conversion? Internet-marketing metrics?

17. Can this marketing company handle all your marketing needs?

At the beginning of this white paper, we explained that there are essentially six healthcare marketing strategies, and covered the various types of marketing people and companies you can work with.

Moving forward, remember there are thousands of potential tactics supporting each strategy.

You need a marketing firm with the widest possible capabilities, so that they can deliver the right solution to you. (It has been said that if all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.)

So consider if they can help you with:

- Increasing professional referrals, through practice reps or other means?
- “Offline” (non-Internet) external advertising, such as newspaper and magazine ads, radio and TV advertising, outdoor and Yellow Pages ads?
- Internal marketing efforts, including increasing patient referrals, reactivating past patients, cross selling, etc.?
- Winning you free press coverage? Conduct public-relations and community-outreach efforts?
- Produce high-quality video at an affordable cost?
- And do they have the expertise, infrastructure and experience to train your staff to handle phone inquiries, implement your marketing strategies and convert prospects into patients?
Healthcare Success Strategies is here for you

We hope you have found this white paper thought provoking and useful.

At Healthcare Success Strategies, we have a team of 50 people who are all experts at their respective areas of expertise. Our principals have worked with thousands of practices over the past twenty years. As preeminent thought leaders, we also have spoken at hundreds of venues and written countless articles.

While of course you can work with whomever you choose, we invite you to call us for a no obligation, exploratory conversation. We’d love to see whether or not we’d be a fit for you.

Our number is (800) 656-0907.
CHECKLIST

Can this organization handle your group practice’s marketing?

- 1. Exactly what kind of firm are you hiring?
- 2. Does your prospective marketing company specialize in healthcare?
- 3. Does the team you’re considering have experience working with group practices?
- 4. Are they focused on “creativity” or on achieving your marketing goals?
- 5. Will your prospective marketing partner do the due diligence?
- 6. Is the marketing company you’re considering able to add value?
- 7. On what sort of business basis will they engage with you?
- 8. Are their fees competitive and reasonable given the value added?
- 9. Can your prospective marketing company help you determine a reasonable marketing budget based on your goals?
- 10. Do they track the success of their programs... including the success of your marketing efforts?
- 11. Whom will you be dealing with?
- 12. What is your prospective marketing company’s development process, and how will their team collaborate with you?
- 13. Does your marketing firm focus on name awareness or direct response?
- 14. Can this marketing team create a compelling brand that differentiates the practice?
- 15. Where is this marketing team located, and is their location truly important?
- 16. Do they possess true, broad-based skill and experience with Internet marketing?
- 17. Can this marketing company handle all your marketing needs?