

## How to re-attract former patients

Marketing to former patients presents unique challenges, whether you're reaching out to inactives or to people you hope will follow you after you relocate or change jobs. If you're trying to reactivate patients who've disappeared, you'll be most effective if you can identify why. "People leave a practice for a lot of different reasons, often without explanation," says Keith Borglum, a practice management and marketing consultant in Santa Rosa, CA.

Patients may have:

- ▶ changed insurance plans,
- ▶ become unhappy with some aspect of your practice,
- ▶ slipped through your recall system,
- ▶ or simply have had no recent medical concerns.

The only way to find out is to ask.

First, you'll need to identify your target audience—and, if possible, compile an electronic list. "Given today's EHRs and practice management software, it's a reasonably simple task to dig out, for instance, all female patients over 65 who haven't been in for two years," says Stewart Gandolf, one of the founding partners of Healthcare Success Strategies, a practice marketing firm in Corto De Caza, CA. But many practices lack either the systems or the savvy and are forced to work manually from a larger, more inclusive list of patients.

Then what? E-mail marketing, say many experts, is often the best way to reach your patient base or a portion of it, but this can present problems, too. Practices as a rule either don't have e-mail addresses for most patients or haven't transferred them from chart to electronic database. In addition, people change Internet service providers so frequently that a patient e-mail list could be quickly outdated.

Next best, says Gandolf, is a highly readable, emotionally compelling letter that stresses why it's important for the patient to come back, especially in the case of the chronically ill. If you have separate letters for different scenarios, so much the better. But even generic letters need to mention the patient by name, perhaps note his or her last appointment, and maybe even refer to the individual's condition. Gandolf advises ending with a PS—the second-most read part of a letter, he says. This is the place to inquire whether particular problems may be keeping a former patient away and to make it clear that you would welcome the opportunity to address and resolve them.

### What if patients don't respond?

Nonrespondents should receive a follow-up telephone call from a staff member who's trustworthy, thorough, and has great people skills. ("If you force the wrong one to make the follow-up calls, she'll prove what a stupid idea it was in the first place," Gandolf says.)

For patients whose situations are known, tailor the follow-up call accordingly. If Mrs. Smith has switched to a nonparticipating carrier, the staff member should spell out the options available to her, including any financing programs you offer. If, on the other hand, Mrs. Smith has a medical condition that requires regular monitoring, stress the importance that she schedule a visit without delay.

If you're changing jobs or relocating a practice, consider your contractual obligations to your former employer or partners *before* marketing to former patients. And since noncompetition rules vary from state to state, when in doubt, check with an experienced healthcare attorney.

Even if you've signed a noncompete, though, you may still be able to advertise, assuming you don't specifically target former patients. Experts advise running a series of well-crafted newspaper ads, complete with a flattering photo, personal message, and your new address. This—along with the somewhat legally riskier strategy of sending a letter or postcard to every household in your primary Zip Code—will almost certainly reach former patients who'd love to see you in your new setting.



### Tips

- ▶ Identify your target audience.
- ▶ Send them a letter or an e-mail.
- ▶ Follow up with a phone call.

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