



Tips to Market Your Practice for the New Year

BY ORLY AVITZUR, MD

I confess I find myself cringing every time I see an ad in the local trade paper for doctors promoting their services. But after speaking to experts and neurologists in successful practices while preparing to teach the AAN Winter Regional Course on the subject, I realize it's time to change my attitude. With rapid fluxes in the neurology marketplace, and more certain to come, marketing is no longer an option, it's a necessity.

Just ask Michael W. Morse, MD, a neurologist with an established 18-year practice in Fayetteville, AK. Within the span of one year, Dr. Morse's region went from having four neurologists to nine as each of the hospital systems started hiring their own people, and his three-neurologist practice new appointment waiting time dwindled from six months out to same day. He recalls hearing a similar story from a neurologist in Washington, DC, at an AAN course several years back, and thinking it could never happen to him. So like many physicians, marketing simply did not cross his mind.

"Many physicians would never consider marketing their practices — and often primarily because they're concerned about what their peers will think of them if they do. But the irony in what they don't understand is that by not marketing their services and their value, they are essentially withholding information that can lead more people toward a better quality of care and better health — particularly in a specialty like neurology," said Lonnie Hirsch, founding partner of Healthcare Success Strategies, a firm that creates marketing campaigns for physicians in private practice. "Patients want to make an informed decision but provider lists of HMOs (or PPOs for that matter) don't really help them tell one doctor from another."

So how do we distinguish ourselves

from others on the list and begin to market our practices? Neurologists, practice managers, and experts in the field shared these tips:

1. BUILD YOUR BRAND.

Like any business, marketing success depends on brand recognition — becoming well-known in your community. While physician and patient referrals form a foundation for building a practice, name recognition requires dedicated effort. Simply put, your name and services must be readily available when patients need you.

Associated Neurologists, PC, of Danbury, CT — whose Web site comes up first in a search for "neurologists in Connecticut" and "neurologists in Danbury" — have 28 activities that broadly constitute marketing, and its neurologists, who are all responsible for doing their share, choose whichever appeals to them best. "All efforts focus on creating awareness, building our image, knowing our customer needs, and meeting or exceeding them," said Jan Mashman, MD, a senior neurologist in the nine-neurologist practice.

2. CREATE PRACTICE BROCHURES AND NEWSLETTERS TO PROMOTE YOUR PRACTICE TO A WIDE AUDIENCE.

Brochures should include locations, office hours, and profiles of physicians including their areas of expertise, photos, and credentials. These can be mailed to referring doctors and new patients along with business cards, and distributed at health fairs, lectures, and other public venues. Newsletters can also be used to reach patients and referring physicians and inform them about new subspecialists, treat-



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ments, procedures, and services. They serve as educational tools and regular dissemination can build brand recognition.

After three years in solo practice in North Haven, CT, Adam S. Mednick, MD, PhD, started to see his patient numbers plateau. He sent copies of his brochure, which he had professionally designed, to referring physicians and posted it on his new Web site. Within a year his referrals increased 50 percent and he hired a physician's assistant to join his practice; a new brochure was soon designed for her as well.

3. SPEAK UP — GIVE LECTURES.

Hospitals, local medical societies, and pharmaceutical industry representatives are often looking for specialists to share their expertise through presentations for primary care physicians or other specialists — as are patient groups, community organizations, local employers, and other professional associations — physical ther-

apies, chiropractors, and attorneys. Find a list of local groups from state or national patient advocacy organizations and contact them to ask for their local representative. If you're new to the area, this provides an opportunity for exposure and networking with potential referral sources. If you are already in an established practice, it allows you to remind others of your area of expertise.

4. OFFER YOUR EXPERTISE ON HEALTH ISSUES AND NEWS TO MEDIA.

Ask your hospital media relations department if there are opportunities to be a helpful resource. Contact the health editor of your newspaper and community magazine as well as producers at your local television and radio shows with ideas for newsworthy and timely topics. Sign up for speakers' bureaus at your regional or national professional societies and patient organizations. Media outlets often turn to them as a resource when interviews are needed.

Put together a practice portfolio, which includes a curriculum vitae, a shorter bio, copies of any recent articles written, a black and white press photo, and a list of areas for which the physician has specialized expertise.

Joyce Peters, director of business development and operations at Associated Neurologist, PC, said the practice also writes and distributes timely press releases to the media and responds immediately to requests from the hospital public relations department. Whenever its providers appear in print or on the radio, it adds a link to the story on the "what's new section" of its Web site.

5. SPONSOR EVENTS TO REACH OUT TO THE COMMUNITY.

Upstate Neurology Consultants, a seven-provider practice in Albany, NY, has sponsored numerous charitable and community events over the years such as epilepsy society fundraisers, walks and runs for various neurological conditions, and local school musical events. William S. Henderson, its practice administrator, said: "Involvement in sponsoring these activities gives the practice exposure in the community, especially among those who are dealing with specific neurological conditions. It also demonstrates that our providers care about these conditions and support the good work that is being done by these groups to help our patients."

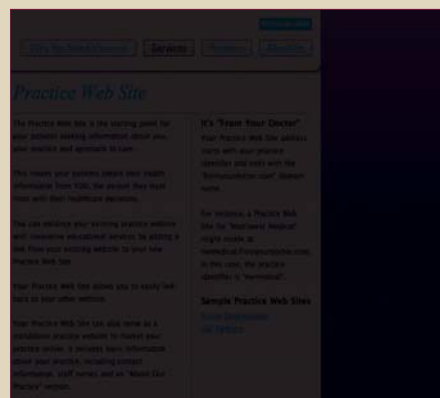
6. DEVELOP A WEB SITE.

Today's consumers want to know where their physicians trained, whether they're

Web site Services for Neurologists



www.neurologychannel.com/enroll/index.shtml
HealthCommunities.com



<http://fromyourdoctor.com/practiceSite.html>: Vivacare



www.yourpracticeonline.com/
Medem iHealth

board-certified, and how long they've been practicing — and often turn to Web search engines like Google.com to get that information. That is why Dr. Morse, of Fayetteville, created a Web site.

After reviewing information from three Web development companies, he built a site with Vivacare, a free physician service. His Web site has a library link for uploading patient information and release forms, a headache calendar and similar clinical tools, directions, and a map. The amateur photographer posted photos of the office's neurologists, employees, as well as shots of the building and interior. He added the URL for the Web site to appointment cards and advertising, and in a very short time, patient appointments improved. Tracking Web traffic on the site, he plans to monitor patient use as he expands the site's features.

Neurologists are adding blogs, podcasts, and other tools to draw in their patients in a more personalized manner. Embedded survey instruments make it easy to record, tabulate, and evaluate patient satisfaction and appeal to computer-savvy patients. Forms that can be completed online, or downloaded and printed to save time in the office are becoming commonplace and often requested by patients. Educational material can include links to selected video, audio, and print to complement your ser-

vices as well. (For more information, visit www.neurotodayonline.com for the Feb. 6, 2007, article, "Blogs, Wikis, and Other Cutting Edge Technologies for Neurology".)

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7. ADVERTISE WITH CAUTION.

If you decide to advertise your practice or a new service such as open access scheduling in the Yellow Pages or another local directory, a word of caution: physicians who advertise their practices to the general public can be held accountable under a state's Consumer Fraud Act as well as state medical board. Consumer fraud suits are considered easier to prosecute than medical-malpractice suits because the burden of proof is less onerous; in most states damages or negligence need not be proven.

"Avoid any marketing that includes any inaccurate or misleading information or even information that could be

easily misinterpreted," advises Hirsch. "It's not so much the medium as the message that can create a problem or the risk of reputation damage," he said.

8. REGULARLY TRACK YOUR ACTIVITIES FOR THE RETURN ON YOUR INVESTMENT.

As with all marketing efforts, it helps to evaluate its success by asking every new patient how they came to you. Adam S. Mednick, MD, PhD, designed five ads around distinct neurological conditions after consulting with a firm that creates marketing campaigns for physicians in private practice. By collecting information about how patients were referred to his North Haven, CT, practice he learned that his newspaper ads drew 10 percent of his new patients over the past year.

Peters tracks activities by using simple software programs such as Excel worksheets. She uses electronic health records

and practice management software to generate and track reports on volume of referrals, location of referring providers, appointment request calls, and new enrollees.

"Although the venues vary, the basic premise is the same: to find out what they need from us, what we are doing wrong, and what we are not doing that would be of help to them," said Dr. Mashman. "You get into trouble if you say 'things are good, we can stop now.' Because anything can happen at any moment to change the outlook." •

Dr. Avitzur, a neurologist in private practice in Tarrytown, NY, holds academic appointments at Yale University School of Medicine and New York Medical College. She is also the editor-in-chief of the AAN Web site, AAN.com, and chair of the AAN Practice Management and Technology Subcommittee.

For more information on practice marketing, attend the AAN Winter Regional conference in Lake Buena Vista, FL. On Jan. 16, 2009, Dr. Avitzur will be directing PRACTICE MANAGEMENT 202: Expanding Your Practice: What You Need to Know to Ensure Success.