

## The Business Side of Medicine™

# A case for hiring physician liaison for relationship marketing

FIRST OF A THREE-PART SERIES



**By David Schmiede**

The focus when hiring a physician liaison/clinical liaison is gaining new, preferred referrals for your practice. While your physician liaison will call on your existing referral network to insure continued growth, they will also actively call on new or under-served sources for new referrals.

Your physician liaison should use technology, patient testimonials, etc. to educate primary care physicians (PCPs) and their staff on new procedures and clinical technology unique to your practice, while they emphasize the value of your outcomes and the procedural experience of you and your clinical staff. You should make available multiple formats to achieve this – from simple brochures and marketing materials to clinical case study newsletters, webinars, CDs or a competent discussion based on a clinical research study.

Every potential referral physician is different and you need to take an individual approach with each physician and group practice. Take the time to uncover the true needs and interests of each referral partner in an effort to build a professional relationship, create value and establish the trust needed to gain lasting referrals. Follow up is critical. Take the time to insure that your new referral colleagues are completely satisfied with your care and service so that the relationship grows.

The majority of our clients that utilize a physician liaison want to communicate a caring and compassionate branding message that strongly differentiates them from everyone else. They want to grow by winning new doctor referrals, maintain current referral patterns and recapture referral sources that have slipped away.

As you consider implementing relationship marketing techniques into your practice, remember that each referral source is looking for something completely different, but they all want their individual needs met. Build relationships with potential referral sources by meeting their needs as they have defined them, which might take some research. Once you understand their needs, align your services to meet those needs. That demonstrates your practice's value, how well you listen, and how much you care.

In an increasingly competitive market to deliver vein care within your service area, physicians are faced with a multitude of issues threatening their success and viability as a standalone, independent

medical practice. A constantly changing reimbursement structure and clinical protocols increasingly affect the practice of medicine. In order to stay competitive and succeed long-term, physician leadership must take an active, structured approach to the strategic planning process to remain competitive. The paramount goal of any medical practice should be to thoroughly and appropriately assess the value you provide within your service area, and to ensure that strategic planning will foster the continued delivery of clinical value in a dynamic health care market.

Marketing is all about letting patients and referral physicians know about your qualifications and persuading them that your vein practice is the best choice for vein care in a crowded marketplace. For effective marketing, you have to deliver this message on an ongoing basis. Your marketing strategy is a summary of your practice's clinical competencies and position in relation to other vein practices in your service area. Your sales and marketing plans are the specific actions you're going to undertake to achieve the goals of your marketing strategy.

To succeed in a competitive environment, it's vital to distinguish your vein practice and your clinical capabilities in a way that builds trust and inspires patient and physician referrals. It's increasingly important to raise your visibility with direct-to-consumer marketing activities and to extend your visibility with current and potential referral physicians through the use of a physician liaison.

So whether you want to market to win more doctor referrals, open additional offices, overcome marketplace disadvantages, differentiate yourself from the competition or simply get more patients to call you, it all starts with developing a marketing strategy and a marketing plan.

A marketing plan for a vein practice is a strategy that is designed to facilitate the achievement of specific growth goals. It is not simply scheduling an occasional free vein screening or patient event. It is an overall strategy that encompasses advertising, media relations/PR, physician referrals, patient referrals, as well as planned events to create practice exposure (free screenings, PCP lunch n learns, community education seminars, etc.).

Effective strategic planning must be understood as a process that equally emphasizes internal and external factors impacting the practice. The medical practice undertaking this process must be willing to challenge the very core of its business in light of patient needs, external PCP referral patterns, and the strengths and weaknesses of your current staff.

What are the consequences of incorrectly assessing your competitive landscape? In the current environment of declining reimbursement,

increased competition and rapidly changing technology, the stakes have changed and the consequences of not understanding your competitive marketplace have gone up.

## INSIGHTFUL THINKING

Tailoring your clinical and administrative operations to be more time-sensitive and reliable than your competitors' entrenches the working relationship. Your goal should be to make it easy to do business with you by being more responsive than your competitor(s).

When was the last time you evaluated the effectiveness of your efforts to build a long-lasting referral relationship with primary care physicians in your service area? Think about these proven tips to strengthen rapport and increase referral volume.

1. **Think strategically about referral patterns.** Do you know who refers to your vein practice, who doesn't, and why? Ask your front desk staff to generate a weekly or monthly referring physician report by procedure. Which physicians currently refer and what types of cases do they send? Do the non-referrers know about all of the conditions you treat or has a patient of theirs experienced a less-than-favorable visit to your office? Identifying the reasons why these physicians do and do not refer can provide the foundation for improving relationships and referral patterns.

2. **Identify other vein practices courting your referral physicians.** Success is not achieved by ignoring your competitors but rather by anticipating competitive issues and influences so you can always have a proactive plan and strategy for staying ahead of your competition. Referring physicians often report dissatisfaction with specialists who are slow or late in providing consultation reports. Review your internal processes to make sure communication flows back to the referring physician within 48 hours of seeing patients. Before and after pictures are a good idea to support your clinical skills in the referring physician's mind to encourage additional referrals. Use clinical case studies to bring attention to additional benefits of vein treatments.

3. Improve the speed of consultation reports by asking whether referring physicians can receive them via secure e-mail. This also allows you to build a valuable email database that gives you instant access to your referral physicians.

4. **Be available.** Get patients in as quickly as you can.

5. **Listen carefully.** Patients tell their doctor when specialists or their staff are rude or abrupt - which makes the referring physician look bad for sending the patient to you.

6. **Say thanks.** Whether it's a telephone call or handwritten note, show your appreciation by thanking referring physicians for their confidence in you.

## RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

Relationship marketing is one of several approaches you can use to promote your vein practice, but it is unquestionably the most valuable. Relationship marketing, supported by the right integrated strategy, produces more new patients than any other method. Relationship marketing can also be one of the least expensive marketing approaches, but it is rare to find practices executing it effectively because it is hard to do well.

When most physicians think of relationship marketing, they think of establishing and entrenching their relationships with key referral sources, such as PCPs. That's only partially right. While PCPs account for a lot of the referrals that vein practices get each year, some practices rely or focus on them too much and miss out on establishing solid relationships with their largest referral source: current patients.

Market research has repeatedly shown that previous patients refer about 40 percent of all new patients. Interestingly, from a clinical standpoint, former patients are the least qualified to make those referrals. Instead, they base their referrals on how they feel about you as well as their experiences with your staff.

Before you spend another dollar on external resources to market your vein practice, devote time to ensuring that the service you deliver to patients doesn't just produce satisfaction or loyalty, but also creates patient advocacy. True patient advocates are your most valuable marketing assets. They not only return to you for additional services, but rave about you to others. **VTN**

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *In the next issue, we will look at the meticulous execution of these principles.*

*David Schmiede is the president and CEO of Vein Specialists of America Ltd. He can be reached at 630-638-0060 or at David.Schmiede@VeinBusiness.com.*

---

*Reprinted with permission from Vein Therapy News, a PCI Publication ([www.pcineews.com](http://www.pcineews.com)).*