



Guerrilla Marketing for YOUR PRACTICE

BY SARA MICHAEL

Gone are the days when a phone book ad was enough to market your practice. Here are some modern, effective, and cheap ways to bring in new patients.

Adam Alpers knew a Web site would help promote his practice and introduce him to new patients searching online for a family physician. But he also knew it needed to be more than what he calls a “Hi, how are you?” site with simply his practice name and address.

“The most important part isn’t who you are, but what you have to offer, content-wise,” says Alpers, a family-practice physician in Ocala, Fla.

So Alpers developed a robust site, adding answers to questions his patients frequently ask,

information on common medications, and links to outside information. Next to The Yellow Pages — a marketing staple to reach many patient communities — and word of mouth, an Internet search is a top way patients find his practice, Alpers says. “If you type in ‘primary care’ and ‘Ocala,’ I’m No. 1.”

But Alpers doesn’t stop his marketing efforts there. He sets up a table at the annual community health fair, sends an e-mail newsletter to his patients each month, and occasionally

runs a brief commercial on a local cable network. “You have to put yourself out there,” he says.

Physicians are increasingly finding that a phone book ad or highway billboard isn’t enough to drum up new patients. Instead, many practices are adopting guerrilla marketing tactics — taking a page from the unconventional marketing approach originated more than 25 years ago.

Many practices are now using modern, effective, and cheap approaches to promoting their practices, and it’s time to get on board. Welcome to Guerrilla Marketing 101.

COMMIT TO A NEW PLAN

Guerrilla marketing for a medical practice essentially means that the practice tries out a variety of different marketing tactics that are cost effective and flexible, says Marlee Ward, president of Rx MD Marketing Solutions. As healthcare becomes more consumer-driven,

in summary

Many practices are finding that a phone book ad or highway billboard isn't enough to bring in new patients. Here are some guerrilla marketing tactics that can effectively and inexpensively spread the word about your practice:

- Build an online presence. A Web site providing relevant health information and an easily-searched title will help your practice rise above the online din.
- Participate in community health fairs, or hold open houses and seminars to introduce the public to your practice.
- Make yourself available to the media for comments on relevant health topics.
- Tactfully ask your happy patients to refer you to their friends and family, and consider an incentive program for those who do.

practices are really having to tune into what patients want and build relationships, rather than rely on the old school approaches. Where traditional marketing strategies are based on the principle of interrupting your audience with a "Hey, look at me" ad, Ward explains, guerrilla marketing engages the audience with a "Hey, how can I help you?" message.

"This is going to require that practice owners effectively communicate their value to the patients they want to attract," Ward says.

Traditional marketing isn't dead, she says, but instead is being supplemented and supported by some rogue methods.

Any marketing path you embark on requires a commitment, Ward says, so your first step is to develop a consistent strategy — and stick to it. Marketing in "spurts and fits" won't work, she says.

"You can't just send out a one-time postcard mailer and expect people to come beating down your door, or just run a radio ad once and expect people to call," she says. "You have to be committed to

your strategy and it has to be well thought out."

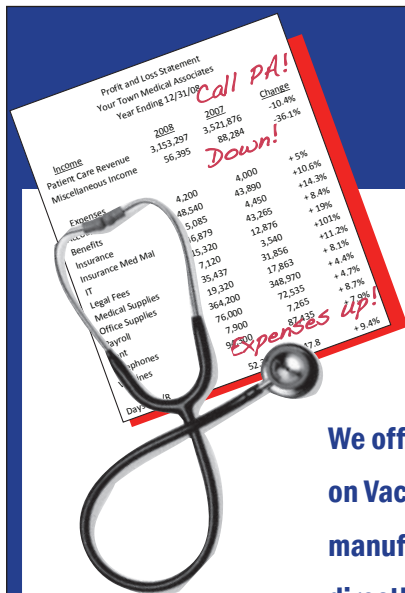
It also has to make sense for your practice. Consider your practice's offerings, patient base, and goals, Ward says. Your marketing plan should be carefully tailored to the services you provide and types of patients you want to reach.

EMBRACE ALTERNATIVES

Here are a few guerrilla marketing strategies to consider:

Use the Internet. From social media to online ads, the Web offers a whole new marketing world. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. First things first: Does your practice have a Web site? If not, you could be losing countless patients who are Googling for a primary-care physician in your city, town, or county.

Developing a site doesn't have to be a major investment, either. Take Alpers for example: He built a site on his own that's chock full of useful information, and he says he's not that Internet-savvy. Consider free Web site design software and a few bucks a month to host the domain name.



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“Most people nowadays are taking their first steps online,” Ward says. “The Yellow Pages is predicted to decline by 35 percent in readership over the next five years, so not being on the Web is just leaving a huge chunk of your target market out of the picture.”

But just as important as having a Web site is having a good one. That is, one that communicates information about your practice, what you have to offer, and how you can help prospective patients. That’s why Alpers wanted to go beyond an address and phone number and actually post useful, patient-friendly information.

Having a Web site out in the ether also won’t guarantee that you’ll be found. Search engine optimization requires a little more work on your end.

For example, when creating a site, you shouldn’t call it Dr. Smith’s Practice. Very few patients will key in your name during their search for a new doc. Instead consider a few key words in your title that denote your location and specialty, like “New York City” and “podiatry,” says Evan Bailyn, founder of First Page Sage, a search engine optimization firm in New York. “This small detail will dramatically change the results.”

Also take the time to list your practice in Google’s Local Business Center, a free listing that allows you to provide business information that will be seen when someone searches for a physician in their area, Bailyn says. “That’s a great way to get your practice front and center for anyone looking for a doctor,” he says.

Get out into the community. Once you’ve thought critically about how patients come to your practice, you

can determine what people and groups you need to influence to direct more patients your way, says Linda Pophal, a marketing consultant and head of Chippewa Falls, Wis.-based Strategic Communications.

For example, if you’re a specialist and need to reach primary-care providers, try hosting an event to connect you, she says. This could be in person, such as a luncheon or an after-hours meeting, or virtually through a social media network.

Practices should be “thinking differently and being much more strategic in the things they are doing to reach out and connect with the right audiences,” Pophal says.

Also consider major employers in your area and how you might connect with them, such as through brown bag lunches or Webinars directed at a specific population.

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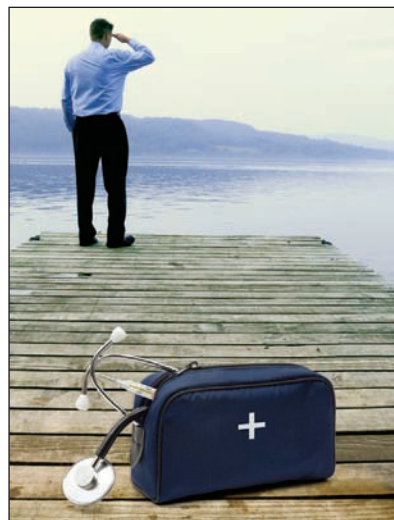
wasted because we aren’t reaching people who are in need of our services,” Pophal says.

Alpers says a number of patients come to his practice after he participates in the annual health fair hosted by the local retirement community. “We get exposure to literally hundreds if not thousands of patients,” he says, including his established patients who stop by at the health fair and introduce him to their friends or family.

Identify your target market — new parents, women, retirees, for example — and plan a public event at your practice with that market in mind. This allows patients to meet

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Marlee Ward, Rx MD
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with you and your staff, see your office, and ask questions, Ward says. One of Ward's clients offered a free skin cancer screening at an open house, and the practice was quickly booked out for two and a half weeks, she says.

And you know those packets of information and coupons that arrive at your door if you're new in town? Those so-called Welcome Wagons are another place for practices to get their name out, says Shel Horowitz, marketing consultant and author of "Grass-roots Marketing: Getting Noticed in a Noisy World." Contact the local Welcome Wagon distributor, hospitality association, or chamber of commerce, he says.

Be available to the media. Newspapers and television reporters are often looking for experts to comment on the health story *du jour*. Just think about the countless stories on the H1N1 flu virus, many accompanied by information about protecting yourself or getting vaccinated. Those local news stories are a great way to get your name out there. Consider what areas

your practice specializes in, and put yourself out there as a knowledgeable source. Anticipate what kind of information the media might be looking for and be ready with some talking points.

"You want to do more than be there when they come calling," Horowitz notes. "Send out notices that say 'I am available if you need someone.'" A Web site can again be helpful here when reporters are poking around for local sources.

Pophal notes that being covered in the media can act as a third-party assessment of your practice and what you have to offer. That can not

only put your name out there to prospective patients, but also lend a bit of credibility.

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Linda Pophal, Strategic Communications

"Health-care is such a popular topic these days; for those who are able to express themselves well and can offer something of real value, physicians in particular, there is a lot of opportunity out there," she says.

Tap into the resources around you.

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