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MARKETING YOUR PRACTICE EFFECTIVELY

Although the term *marketing* may have negative connotations for many physicians, conjuring up images of tacky Yellow Pages advertisements, marketing is not just advertising or self-promotion. Marketing is the whole process of distinguishing yourself, and your practice, in the marketplace.

Whether you are just starting out in practice or seeking to expand your practice, a comprehensive marketing plan can help you stay on track and reach your goals. A successful marketing plan should include the following elements.

OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

The key to successful marketing is determining what your goals are for your practice and developing a comprehensive plan to meet those goals. The first step is to decide where you want your practice to go and how you are going to get there. This part of the plan is extremely personal. One objective of more and more psychiatrists is to establish a niche in the market. There are a number of clinical specialty areas within psychiatry that can allow you to create a marketing niche, including:

- Geriatric psychiatry (substance abuse, medication management, depression)
- Child and adolescent psychiatry
- Workplace/occupational psychiatry (drug testing, employee assistance programs)
- Clozaril management
- Grief/bereavement counseling
- Consultation/liaison psychiatry
- Crisis intervention (disaster relief)
- Substance abuse/dual diagnosis
- Post-traumatic stress
- Pain management
- Family issues (step-parenting, parent coaching, divorce recovery)
- Forensic psychiatry
- Neuropsychiatry

Some psychiatrists develop a niche by marketing general psychiatry services to special populations. This would include treating non-English-speaking patients, patients who are blind or hearing impaired, patients with medical rehabilitation needs, and patients with severe and/or persistent mental health problems. Expanding your practice into new sites of service is another way to develop a niche. You may want to consider obtaining admitting privileges at key institutions, as well as providing services to patients in their homes, at worksites, in prisons, and in schools.

Once you decide the objectives for your practice, the next step is to define your goals. They should quantify your objectives, be measurable, and have a timeframe for achievement. Simply

April 2006

saying that you want to increase the number of private-pay patients in your practice is probably not enough. It is better to say that you want to increase the number of private-pay patients in your practice by 25 percent over the next twelve months.

Another important consideration in setting goals is to make sure they are realistic. For most psychiatrists starting out, maintaining a practice that is 100 percent private pay may be impossible. Setting this as a goal is likely to guarantee failure for your marketing plan.

STRATEGY STATEMENT

The strategy statement should broadly describe how you are going to meet your goals. You should address the following questions in your strategy statement:

- **What is your target market?** Remember that you may need to market yourself not only to potential patients and referral sources, but also to managed care companies (see Chapter 27), insurance companies, and large employers. Each of these groups will have different needs and expectations. Although targeting these external customers is important for maintaining and expanding your practice, you must not forget your internal customers—your current patients. General business analyses have shown that it is much less expensive to keep the customers you have than to recruit new ones. Of course you should not try to keep patients in your practice who no longer need your services, but it is important to ensure that they are aware of all the services and benefits your practice offers. This will reduce the likelihood that a patient will leave the practice before treatment is complete. In addition, current patients are an excellent source for referrals. If your patients are familiar with the full range of services your practice provides and are satisfied with the treatment they receive, they are more likely to refer other patients to you.
- **What message do you want to send about yourself?** What is it about your practice that distinguishes it from others? Do you offer any special services or have subspecialty training? Do you have experience with specific types of patients, such as senior citizens, children, adolescents, or non-English speakers?
- **Are there any strategic alliances you need to form?** These can be alliances with other psychiatrists, physicians, nonphysician clinicians, employer groups, community service organizations, and universities in your area. Becoming more visible in the community is a good way to increase awareness of your practice and of your specific areas of expertise. Have you developed collaborative relationships with referring physicians and nonphysician providers? Such relationships can be an excellent source of referrals when other clinicians learn that you are willing to work with them to meet the needs of patients.

ASSESS THE CURRENT PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT

In analyzing the current environment, it is helpful to consider social, economic, legal, technological, and competitive issues. Who's out there? Who has the managed care contracts? The following questions will help you begin to formulate your assessment:

- Are there underserved client groups in your local area? Who are they?
- Do you (or would you) enjoy working with any of these groups?
- Do you have unique skills that could be marketed to any of these groups?

- Would targeting any of these groups complement your practice's financial goals and operational structure?
- How prevalent is managed care in your locale?
- Are independent provider networks developing or already in place?

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

The next step is to look more closely at your practice and yourself. Your goal is to identify your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and possible threats to provide a starting point for developing an action plan that will work for your practice. It is important to remember that one practice's strength can be another's weakness, depending on their external environment and practice goals.

The following questions will help you begin to identify your practice's strengths and weaknesses:

- Are you board certified?
- Do you have subspecialty training?
- Do you offer any services that are unique?
- Do you speak any foreign languages or know sign language?
- How involved are you with the local psychiatric community? Are you active in your APA District Branch?
- How involved are you with the local medical community? Do you belong to your local medical society?
- How do you feel about managed care? Do you want to be more or less involved?
- In what treatment settings do you practice?
- How convenient is your office in terms of parking, access to public transportation, and operating hours?

The following questions will help you start the process of identifying your opportunities and any possible threats:

- How prevalent is managed care in your area (private and public sector)?
- What are the demographics of your current patient base? How do they compare to the demographics of the population in your area?
- What types and levels of psychiatric services are available in your area? Are there "new" services that need to be introduced?
- What types of allied mental health professionals practice in your area? Are they competitors or potential allies?

ACTION PLAN

Using your strategy statement as a guide, your next step is to develop an action plan. This should include the specific activities you are going to undertake to meet your goals and a timeline for meeting them. Although your action plan will vary according to your specific goals and strategies, becoming an active part of the surrounding community is vital if you want your practice to grow. The following are sources of referrals to be aware of. You'll note that almost all of them have to do with involving yourself in the life of the community.

- **Current Patients and Referral Sources.** As stated before, in business it is easier to keep old customers than to attract new ones, and this is true for medical practices as well. When your

current patients are happy with the service they receive from you and your staff, they are more likely to continue to seek treatment at your practice and more likely to refer people to you. To keep your current patients happy, maintain a comfortable office area, schedule appointments to minimize unnecessary waiting-room time, and treat all patients as appreciated customers. Physicians, other clinicians, and others who refer patients to you should be treated with the same courtesy. When another clinician asks you to see a patient, follow up with a thank you letter (see Appendix M) and a summary of your evaluation and treatment plan. Keeping the lines of communication open with referral sources not only makes them more likely to refer to you again, it also makes good clinical sense.

- **Community Mental Health Organizations.** Contact the community organizations that support mental health awareness programs. The members of these groups are usually laypeople and clinical professionals; you can offer to provide them with a psychiatrist's perspective on mental health issues.
- **Free Clinics.** Do volunteer work at emergency shelters, halfway houses, and the like. You'll not only be helping people who need help and might not get it otherwise, you'll gain experience working with different patient populations and make yourself known to the larger community of caregivers.
- **Telephone Hotlines and Emergency Services.** As with volunteering at free clinics, when you help out with hotlines, either by training counselors or assisting callers, you not only help the community, you become a trusted part of it.
- **Speaking Engagements.** Offer yourself as a speaker on mental health issues to local organizations (e.g., garden clubs, civic organizations, Rotary Clubs) and to libraries that sponsor educational lectures.
- **The Religious Community.** Offer mental health services to help local clergy deal with the emotional needs of their congregations. You can offer to speak on issues that may be of interest to the congregation, or you can provide workshops for either the clergy or the congregation. You can also offer to see indigent patients referred by the clergy.
- **Teachers and Parent Teacher Associations.** Contact the school principal or a teacher you know and offer to give classroom lectures or workshops on specific health education issues.
- **Communications Materials.** Another way to promote your practice is with brochures or other written materials. Brochures not only allow you to describe your services but can help establish a recognizable image for the practice. Your practice brochure should include office hours, billing policies, insurance coverage accepted, services offered, profiles of clinical staff, and a list of any hospital affiliations. These booklets can be displayed in your office, distributed as part of a direct mail campaign, or provided to local community groups for distribution to members. When you do an outreach activity like the ones listed above, it's especially good for you to have materials to hand out when someone expresses an interest in your practice.
- **Local Organizations.** Join local groups like the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club.

- **Public Relations.** Public relations involves working with members of the news media to address mental health issues surrounding current events. For this to be successful, you must be willing to approach reporters and other members of the media and offer your insights as a psychiatric expert. In many cases this amounts to free advertising for the practice, since you obtain access to the media at no monetary cost to you.
- **Paid Advertising.** This includes everything from placing a listing in the local Yellow Pages to buying television air time. This is one of the most expensive marketing actions you can undertake, and you need to be careful to ensure that your message is appropriate and getting to your target group. All advertising outlets track demographic information on their audiences, and you should request this information prior to buying any advertising. Also, before you purchase any advertising other than a Yellow Pages listing, try to get a read on the community's attitude toward physician advertising.
- **Internet.** Establishing a web page is an inexpensive way to reach potential patients. These days many people depend on the internet for all of their research. You can use your personal web page to describe your background and training; explain any special services you offer; provide your office address, phone number, and hours; list which insurance you accept (essentially all the information you'd have in your office brochure); and you can also post articles that you've published as well as information from other sources about mental illnesses and their treatment.

REVIEWS AND REVISIONS

The final element of your marketing plan involves monitoring your progress in terms of meeting your goals and staying within your marketing budget. Periodically, at least once per quarter, you should review your goals, marketing budget, and the success of action plan items to assess the effectiveness of your marketing plan. This review allows you to identify problem areas as well as areas that are succeeding at a better than anticipated rate. The marketing plan is intended to be a living plan that works for you. If something is not working, revise it or get rid of it altogether. One easy way to monitor the success of your marketing plan is to maintain a patient referral log. When a new patient calls to schedule an appointment, ask how he heard about the practice. By keeping track of this information, you'll be able to determine which of your marketing efforts are generating the most referrals and which are not working as well. Change is inevitable. As the public and private sectors continue to focus on reducing the costs and improving the quality of psychiatric care, you must be prepared to face changes and make the most of them.