

## Public Relations Tips for the Practitioner

There are many misconceptions among the chiropractic ranks about the function and value of public relations. Some feel that it's either tremendously complex, depends on who you know, or only really applies when you are an acknowledged expert. Others consider that even if you generate a little press, it doesn't work unless new patients arrived directly because of it. But the enlightened few realize that no practice can flourish without public relations.

So what exactly is PR? The function of public relations creates a favorable operating climate in which a practice can prosper and expand. It encompasses all manner of actions, ranging from media relations and speaking engagements to simple but vital matters: smiling at patients and answering the phone correctly. PR, then, is an essential duty that every business, small or large, must carry out.

### PR Tips

Far from being an esoteric subject that only the highly trained can be entrusted with, the basics of public relations mostly can be quickly grasped and applied to boost new business.

Here are some of the basics:

1. Wear the hat.

The first "trick" in successful public relations is ownership of the hat. Public relations is an integral part of any practice. Unless you want to spend a healthy sum hiring someone to do it for you (it's well worth it for the bigger practices), you must set aside a little time weekly to learn and perform the function.

"Learning how to create my own news coverage has been an incredibly valuable career advancement tool," says John Hsieh, MS, PT, DC, CA, of San Gabriel, California. "I have used it to manufacture many magazine and newspaper articles in recent months, and it hardly cost me a cent."

2. Keep it simple.

Public relations in essence is a lot simpler than chiropractic. Just by applying a few fundamental ideas such as those contained here, press and goodwill are relatively easy to obtain.

3. Beat your own drum.

Read any book on the rise of Microsoft and you'll see that PR and sound marketing were every bit as important as technology in its rapid growth. Many believe there is a better operating system, but who's the leader? Even skilled chiropractors are destined to low business volume if they expect the world to realize how good they are and come pounding on the door. The public won't know unless you tell them. You can't be shy. Those who can't support their glowing claims will shine briefly, then fade like a shooting star; those who can will find lasting fortune.

4. Do something.

To succeed at public relations, you must do things which attract attention. It's surprising how much interest and goodwill can be created by little actions such as a free consultation period for the underprivileged or health education lectures at local schools. It doesn't even have to relate much to your own field. Children's events, anti-drug lectures, candy buy-backs, Toys for Tots and flowers on Mother's Day are consistent winners. Regardless of whether the media picks it up, it still spreads the word that you have people's best interests at heart.

5. Send out press releases.

Find or create newsworthy items, such as the events just mentioned (and hundreds more). Send press releases about them to the local and trade press. Just like one adjustment usually isn't enough, send out a steady stream of good releases. One per month will improve your writing. Eventually, you'll see your name in print.

6. Public contact.

Public relations is not just about events and newspapers. It includes every form of contact with the public, whether a letter, a phone call or a face-to-face meeting. Listen in on how phone calls are answered, check letters before they go out, and look at how your receptionist handles walk-ins. A few surprises are in store. Instead of yelling, however, a little time spent grooming staff on the finer points of public interaction is well spent.

7. Never miss an opportunity.

No matter the place or time, be ready to insert a little PR into the conversation. Rather than tell people "I'm a chiropractor," try, "I help people to achieve optimum performance of the body, live longer and become more active." Many will become genuinely interested in what you do.

Similarly, when a patient or prospective patient asks the receptionist how many years you've been in business, instead of saying "Five years," try something like: "The doctor's been in chiropractic practice for over five years, but because the patients like him so much, we've been expanding rapidly."

8. Publicize success.

A big part of PR is publicizing patient success stories. Solicit testimonials from patients and ask if you can publish them. Use the spectacular ones on banners, letters, posters, articles, business cards and so on. You have good news. Don't sit on it.

9. Speak to magazine and newspaper editors.

Few chiropractors talk to editors, considering them to be some elite breed who are unreachable. Not so. Many are receptive and some would be delighted to take material from you in the form of press releases, articles or even regular columns. Consult their interest and send them the type of material they are looking for.

10. Recycle.

A few mentions in a local paper aren't going to do much, but even more value can be realized by framing articles and placing them in your office, making up press packs to show to others, inserting them in mailings, and so on. Keep those press releases living by redistributing and repromoting them constantly,

11. Persist.

Don't give up after your first press release flops or your first article doesn't create a flood. Those who persevere reap the largest rewards.

## 12. Mean it.

The biggest enemy of public relations is insincerity, or worse, dishonesty. If you say you're going to support needy children, do so. Using lies in public relations eventually backfires.

## The PR Event

Although the above looks easy, like everything else, it takes practice to master. Let's take a look now at how to stage an event. "Toys for Tots," for instance, is not only successful PR, it serves a worthwhile purpose by giving toys to the needy at Christmas.

Print simple leaflets to promote the event. Hand them to patients, display them in stores and libraries (with permission) and fax them to available numbers. Collect up the names and fax numbers of school principals (K-12 and colleges), fire chiefs, police chiefs, churches and city council representatives, and send them the leaflet. Then call everyone you've faxed, tell them about the toy drive and ask for toys for needy children.

All that remains to be done is to locate a charity organization or religious group which helps children in need. Arrange to present the collected toys a few days before Christmas, take a camera along to take snapshots of the kids, the charity group's representative, and you handing out the toys. Finally, type up a press release and send it out to local papers and perhaps some of the trade press too. (If you are unsure what to say, take a look at the publications you wish to appear in and mimic their style and content.)

Some may think that such events are unrelated to the business of chiropractic, but it is important to realize that PR is not a sales pitch. As it makes you known in a broader sphere than your profession, don't worry too much about hitting the "right public" with your events. For instance, the idea that a candy buy-back at Halloween "works only for dentists" is false. By helping others and letting the world know about something worthwhile, you generate personal and practice goodwill. "As long as your name is in the paper, it always seems to mean more business," says Dr. Hsieh.

While it is fine to appear in (or write) articles on your chiropractic work, unrelated news items work just as well, if not better. Clients have had articles ranging from tennis awards to continuing education achievements.

## Advertising CPR

Public relations does more than generate goodwill. In most instances, it also resuscitates the advertising efforts of a practice. Most have had the experience of formerly successful advertising go flat. Interestingly enough, PR seems to work in tandem with marketing, with one complementing the other. You must do both to truly realize their worth. As soon as public relations starts to take hold in an area, conventional ad response multiplies. In fact, PR is probably necessary to bring advertising to a workable and profitable level of return.

Why is this? Compared to advertising, public relations is virtually free. As it is a third-party endorsement, it is believable, unlike most ads. For some, however, the results of PR are hard to accept. It is all too easy to point to the acclaimed or highly successful chiropractors and list the obvious reasons why they reached the top. In the vast majority of cases, it was not an accident of birth, the hand of fate or a supernatural gift which transported these gifted individuals to stardom.

Rather, lurking beneath the surface will be found the workings of skilled public relations.

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