

## True or False: Marketing Is a Mystery

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Over the years, I've asked dozens (no, make that hundreds) of chiropractors to describe how they think about and relate to practice marketing. Reflecting on their answers, I realize that had I posed my question as: "True or false: marketing is a mystery," almost everyone would have said *true* (perhaps with a fist pounding the desk or a foot stomping the floor for added emphasis). Think for a moment about your own attitude toward marketing. Do you feel it always will be a challenge for you? Do you believe that only a small percentage of chiropractors have broken "the code" for successful marketing? Are you often baffled by marketing, feeling that it's a seemingly "unsolvable" mystery?

I'm taking the position that marketing is *not* a mystery. Marketing presents a challenge and it's a puzzle to be solved. It is a learning experience that often entails trial and error. But, when you look objectively and unemotionally at what actually is involved in promoting yourself and your practice, you will find that it's not mysterious at all. Marketing requires creativity and planning, action and accountability, follow-up and measurement. These activities are not mysterious or unfamiliar to you. They're simply what you do when you are committed to growing your practice.

### Universal Marketing Challenge

Attracting the attention of potential patients.

Providing potential patients with enough of the right kind of information at the right time.

Converting an "interested" potential patient into an active patient.

Retaining the patient and establishing a relationship that works for both the patient and the doctor.

Maintaining a level of service (a "wow" experience, a unique outcome) that results in patient retention and referrals.

### COMMON MISTAKES PRACTITIONERS MAKE

Talking (on and on) about what you have to offer and your philosophy on health, and failing to notice the glazed look in the person's eyes.

Giving too much information about what you do and how it works without having first engaged the individual's attention or discovered what your prospect's true issue, challenge, need or preferred future might be. Jumping into your solution too quickly - before determining what it is with which they are struggling or what they want to be different in their life or health.

Thinking the conversation is about you. Doing all the talking (selling), with little active listening. Forgetting to connect on a personal level. Pushing your own agenda. Not recognizing when a potential patient is ready to explore working with you. Going into sales mode way too fast.

Once you "have" the patient, you stop listening and think you know more about what the patients wants, needs or thinks than the patient does. Failing to clarify a patient's expectations throughout their entire course of care. Not appreciating that your motive for care is no substitute for the patient's motive or objective.

Focusing primarily on the early part of care. Providing passive education and taking a patient's commitment to care for granted. Neglecting continued dialogue and engagement with the patient as they progress and their objectives change. Being inconsistent in how you recommend and provide services.

Chiropractors have been conditioned to think about marketing in ways that keep them stuck. Many have adopted unconstructive beliefs about marketing that they can't seem to shake off, even when those beliefs no longer serve them. As a default strategy, they continue to use outmoded marketing

methods that result in unsatisfactory outcomes and that, in some instances, actually do more harm than good.

### Stance Influences Outcome

Complex questions and problems do not always have quick, easy answers and important issues are rarely either black or white. Yet, we often get caught up in either/or, true/false thinking because we have (sometimes unconsciously) adopted a stance - a way of looking at an issue or challenge as if there were only one right or true answer.

Such stances or "frames" bias us toward what we already believe to be true. Cognitive scientist and linguistics pioneer George Lakoff writes that frames are the "mental structures that shape the way we see the world." When examining whether a question, situation or issue is true or false, right or wrong (for you), it is helpful to step back and look at how you are framing that question or issue - in this case, the way you think about practice marketing.

We have difficulty changing how we think because our minds rely on frames, not facts. "Neuroscience tells us that each of the concepts we have - the long-term concepts that structure how we think - is instantiated in the synapses of the brain," says Lakoff in his book, *Don't Think of an Elephant*. Therefore, when we're presented with marketing advice (or any information, for that matter), we filter that advice through a stance or frame that we hold onto strongly with a certain sense of "rightness." Our minds rarely are changed by someone presenting facts, using fear tactics or exerting force.

So, I won't try to convince you to change your mind about marketing by bombarding you with facts, scaring you into taking actions you won't feel comfortable with, or forcing my point of view on you. Instead, I'm going to challenge you to consider how you think about marketing and offer ideas to help you view marketing more positively and promote your practice more effectively.

### Taking the Mystery out of Marketing

There are five universal challenges chiropractors face relative to marketing. When you identify the ways and the degree to which these challenges impact your actions and your success in marketing, you begin to move beyond thinking that "it's all a big mystery" and get on with the business of learning new behaviors and growing your practice. Keep in mind that chiropractors have been taught for decades to market themselves in ways that almost guarantee that they'll inadvertently make these mistakes. Your outlook on marketing can change - along with your experience - if you understand these challenges, recognize your habitual behaviors and implement the solutions offered in the table above.

Which of these five challenges do you struggle with most? Do you default to some of these behaviors during key marketing moments? Are you experiencing diminishing returns as a result? Interestingly, the sustainable solution for all of the mistakes referenced above is the same: Develop yourself professionally and increase your marketing know-how. It's not a new tactic or script that you can learn at a weekend seminar. Effectively addressing these universal marketing challenges requires developing interpersonal competence, increasing emotional intelligence, improving listening skills and learning to communicate more clearly. Here are a few marketing principles you can learn and apply that will help you accomplish these goals and improve your outcomes.

WIIFM. Always, always remember that the patient is asking (albeit not aloud) "What's in it for me?" Stay intently focused on the desires of your patients and then stand back and watch as they do half of your marketing for you. All of your marketing must in some way answer the question: WIIFM.

Outcome trumps process. Chiropractors like to talk about what they do. Patients care little about what you do and a lot about whether what you do will make them feel better. (See above.) Speak the language of results. Talk about what the patient will get from working with you, not about what you do.

Listening works. Only by really listening to your patients will you ever know what's important to them. Until you understand what someone cares about, it's impossible to know how to structure your offer. Learn to ask good, open-ended questions and then *listen without judgment* to the answers. Marketing is about being interested, not interesting.

Marketing is not selling. Don't limit yourself by sticking to facts, fear and force to try to get patients to do what you want them to do. Adults don't respond to these tactics. Encourage dialogue, tell stories of successful outcomes and recognize when you are pushing too hard. When you're met with resistance, back off and reestablish your connection with the patient to discover what their current needs are.

Good relationships are built on trust. Patients are savvy. They see right through slick marketing techniques and tactics and when they do, they have a hard time trusting that you have their best interests at heart. You will establish long-term, trusting relationships by focusing your attention on the feelings, experiences and results of the patients you serve - by seeing their health and health care from their point of view. This goes back to the WIIFM principle.

Becoming successful at marketing also requires a certain degree of practicality and organization. No mystery there. Taking the time to learn about marketing, honing a vision based on what you value and what you want to achieve, setting goals, developing a detailed marketing plan, implementing that plan in a step-by-step strategic fashion, and measuring your return on investment are all key in proving to yourself (evidenced by your own success) that marketing is just marketing - an essential activity for any healthy practice.

Reframing: One Thought at a Time

Shifting the way you think about marketing is a prelude to more effective marketing. If you're convinced at a deep level that marketing is a mystery and that you're destined to spend the rest of your career wondering how it all works, altering your stance will be a challenge. But you can do so by learning to reframe your habitual thoughts, one by one.

For example, if you believe successful marketers are extroverted and charismatic and that's just "not you," shift that thought by remembering that while you may not be the life of the party, you often are complimented on being an excellent listener (which is more important to successful marketing than being charming). Or, if you get discouraged and find yourself thinking "my marketing never pays off," catch yourself in that thought and remind yourself of the marketing efforts you've made in the past that *have* paid off. In other words, question the truth and validity of your own unproductive thoughts as they arise and choose a more empowering thought.

Shifting one thought at a time may not sound like it could be that helpful. It may even sound a bit "woo-woo." But, it's much more effective than "holding an affirmation" (which has something of a magic-wand quality to it). Shifting your thinking is an active process. Catching yourself in a disempowering thought, challenging yourself to consider whether the thought really is true, and then consciously shifting that habitual thought to one that is more positive will, over the course of time, help you adopt an effective attitude toward marketing. Holding a more affirmative stance (even if you have to operate in an initial "fake it 'til you make it" mode) will help you consistently engage in the actions necessary to successfully market your practice.

## A Game of Strategy

I appreciate and empathize with chiropractors who tell me they are confused and frustrated by marketing. The process can feel mystifying and present a real challenge. It's not necessarily easy to predict what will be effective in a given practice at a given time. You do an activity that seems as if it should yield good results, only to see the idea fall flat. Or, you accidentally stumble upon a strategy that is wildly successful, even though you've never seen it work for any of your colleagues. I don't call this mystery. I call it trial and error, or learning from experience.

Marketing isn't a mystery; it's a game - one that can be played successfully if you know the rules and the strategy. When it comes to winning at the game of marketing, there are both inner and outer strategies to consider. The inner strategy entails recognizing your stance and how you tend to frame situations, managing your inner dialogue, developing emotional intelligence and being attentive and authentic during patient encounters. The outer strategy involves a willingness to learn, plan, implement and measure your marketing efforts objectively. Both aspects of the marketing game are equally important. Finding cohesion between the inner and outer game requires awareness, choice, experimentation and commitment. But when the inner and outer games do come together, you will find marketing to be less mysterious and more satisfying in the long run.

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