

Five Easy (and Smart) Ways to Market your Practice

Mark Sanna, DC, ACRB Level II, FICC

What's the best way to promote your practice? How can you market your practice and get your name in front of potential new patients when money is tight or you're just starting up? How can you get the word out about your practice in the most affordable way? Promoting their practice is an ongoing challenge for many chiropractors. Whether you're just starting out or have been in practice for years, here are five high-impact approaches that don't cost a bundle and can work for virtually every practice.

1. Talk to your patients.

It's amazing how much money chiropractors spend to attract new patients when they have a wealth of opportunity and information in their existing patient base. One of the best ways to build your practice is to talk to existing patients. Ideally, this should be done by someone other than the doctor so patients are willing to be honest and open.

When you assess perceptions, you don't need to talk to hundreds of individuals; simply choose five to ten patients and contact them to ask if they'd participate in a phone interview. Here's how it works:

1. Send a letter asking permission to have someone contact them about your practice.
2. Have the interviewer call and ask value-based questions such as:
 - What health and wellness challenges were you facing when you considered the services of ABC Chiropractic Center?
 - How important were ABC Chiropractic Center's services in addressing your challenges?
 - What did you value most about your experience with the chiropractic center?
 - What other products or services do you wish they offered that could help you with other health and wellness challenges?
3. After all the interviews have been conducted, compile the information to discover trends and themes.
4. Send a thank-you letter to every patient who participated. Include key lessons from the interviews and explain the specific changes you plan to make to your practice based on this information.

The important part here is to use what you learn. If you don't make changes to your practice, then you've wasted everyone's time. One practice that recently did this tripled their revenue in one year — they learned what people wanted, how their solution made a difference, how to present it, how to price it, and then proceeded to make changes that improved those areas.

Keys to success: The conversation with your patients is just that, a conversation. Don't fire questions at them; instead, have the interviewer engage in a conversation and gather as much valuable data as you can. Remember, it's not about how satisfied they are — it's about how much

they valued your product or service.

2. Creatively package your marketing campaigns.

A postcard is one way to market your practice. But how about putting a small box together with a fork, knife, spoon and a custom printed napkin that invites a prospective referral source such as a medical doctor, attorney or local business owner to "have lunch on us?" Think outside the box and your marketing campaigns will have more impact. Think about the little details that will get attention. When it comes to your gravy, lumps are bad. When it comes to getting your marketing message past the gate keepers and into your prospect's hands, lumps are just the ticket. Lumpy mail is a direct mail piece or package with some dimension to it. A lumpy mail package screams, "Notice me; open me." A lumpy mail campaign can give your marketing message center stage attention.

Take steps to make new patients feel special. Patients respond to being recognized, especially in these rush-rush, get-the-lowest-price times. One marketing-savvy practice encloses a small, lavender-scented sachet along with a handwritten note welcoming each new patient to the practice. The sachet and note cost pennies but add something memorable to the exchange. Another successful practice created business cards that their patients keep. Most business cards are tossed within hours of a meeting. Instead of having your card tossed, they created one that recipients actually use. They mail new patients a good-looking notepad with their contact info and tagline on every page. The business card notepad is referred to almost daily, kept for 30 days or so and carries a high remembrance factor.

Keys to success: Set a clear objective for your marketing campaign, and identify how you'll measure its success. Then follow up to measure the results and adjust the program if necessary.

3. Get the word out with publicity.

Think you can't do PR or publicity without employing the services of a high-priced firm? You can! Although a good firm brings tremendous contacts and experience, most practices can do enough PR on their own to spark the public's interest. Court your local media. Editorial features convey more credibility with prospective patients than paid advertising does. To get coverage from the local media, whether from the town newspaper, from TV or radio stations, or from trade journals, you need a fresh, timely story. Look for something unusual about what your practice does and publicize it. Send out press releases to local newspapers, radio stations, cable TV stations, and magazines whose audiences are likely to be interested in your services. Be sure to post the press releases on one or more online press release services, too, being sure to include links to your website. To increase your chance of having the material published, send along a photo (but not to radio stations) with your press release. Editors of printed publications are often in need of "art" (drawings or photos) to fill space and break up the gray look of a page of text.

[pb]Publicize your publicity. Whenever you do get publicity, get permission from the publisher to reprint the article containing the publicity. Make photocopies and mail the copies out with newsletters or any other literature you use to market your practice. The publicity clips lend credibility to the products and services you provide.

Keys to success: In one word, leverage. Though it does happen, don't expect one story placement to generate dozens of new patients. Your success depends on leveraging each press release, each article and each published mention. Put it all on your Web site: Create a news page and add a "What's New" area on your home page. Add it to your marketing kit and send the piece to patients, referral sources and professional organizations. Include a note in your newsletter that says

"Recently Seen In..." And remember: PR is more cost-effective and more credible than advertising.

4. Leverage existing relationships.

Most people know at least 200 people. Do the math: If you know 200 people and they each know 200 people, that's 40,000 potential contacts! Spend time developing relationships with the people you already know — patients, people you meet through professional networking organizations, friends and even family.

Start by making a list of all the people you know. Next, prioritize your list into As, Bs and Cs. A's are your advocates. These are the people who feel strongly about you. They're the "cheerleaders" who would refer business to you right now. Bs could become advocates if they knew more about you, so you need to spend time with these people to educate them. Cs are those people you don't communicate with often enough. You may keep them in the loop, but they need more time and nurturing before they'd refer any business your way. If there are any names that remain, delete them. Learn to ask for referrals. Ask existing patients, prospects and casual acquaintances. When you get them, follow up on the leads.

Get your business cards into the hands of anyone who can help you in your search for new patients. Visit your cheerleaders and leave a small stack of business cards to hand out to their friends and colleagues. Talk to all the vendors from whom you buy products or services. Give them your business card, and ask if they can use your services or if they know anyone who can. If they have bulletin boards where business cards are displayed (printers often do, and so do some supermarkets, hairdressers, etc.), ask if yours can be added to the board.

Keys to success: Educate, don't sell. The key here is to build relationships. These develop over time as you create credibility and trust. To be truly effective, you must always be on the lookout for ways you can help your network. Start from the perspective of giving more than you ask and your network will become your most valuable marketing tool.

5. Commit to electronic marketing.

Marketing through e-mail is flexible, cost-effective, easy to measure (assuming you put the right tracking in place) and high impact. It allows you to easily drive traffic to your Web site, reach a broad geographic audience and stay in frequent contact with your customers and prospects. E-mail marketing allows you to market your services and establish your expertise with your audience.

Use it for newsletters, new product announcements or to share your publicity success. The ideas are endless. But know that this flexibility and ease-of-use can cause problems. Remember, this is a marketing campaign. So be sure to think it through, develop an appropriate message, create a piece that reflects your brand, know your objectives and make sure the information is valuable for your market, or people will quickly unsubscribe.

Most practices have harnessed the power of e-newsletters — and you definitely should be sending out one, too. It's very cost-effective. But exactly because e-mail marketing is now nearly ubiquitous, you can quickly stand out by occasionally sending personal, surface mail letters to existing and prospective patients. Just make sure the letter delivers something patients want to read, whether a personal analysis of recently published research or news item.

Become an online expert. This is the "free sample" approach to bringing in new patients. Research active e-mail discussion lists and online bulletin boards that are relevant to your practice. Join several and start posting expert advice to solve problems or answer questions. Online video is another great way to promote your practice in a digital format. Put videos of your expert advice on

YouTube and other video-sharing sites. Set up a free listing for your business in search engine local directories. You can do this at [Google.com/local/](https://www.google.com/local/); [Bing.com/local/](https://www.bing.com/local/); and listings.local.yahoo.com/. Be sure to include your website link and business description. Set your business profile or page up on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. Be sure your business profile includes a good description, keywords and a link to your website. Look for groups or conversations that talk about health and wellness and participate in the conversations. You will need to keep this up for a bit. But the rewards come back in new patients and referrals.

Keys to success: Don't be seen as a "spammer"! Send e-mail only to those people who have given permission. When someone asks to be removed, respond immediately.

A Continuous and Targeted Process

Too many practice owners think marketing is like a trip to the dentist — something you just have to do every six months or so. But when marketing is continuous and targeted rather than occasional and shotgun, it gets easier. If prospective patients have a positive view of your practice and reputation before you call or before they start looking for a chiropractor, you're that much closer to the result you seek to achieve. The news flash is that ongoing marketing isn't tied to a price tag. It's defined only by putting the right message in front of the right person at the right time.