

Marketing Insights for New and Established Doctors

Chiropractors have long demonstrated an obsession with new patients. This is understandable, as new patients are the lifeblood of a practice. In these times in which managed care continues to influence the direction of new patients, individual practices are often penalized for inadequate efforts to educate their market base as to the care they offer. As if the solution is a trade secret, each chiropractic publication advertises various programs promising unlimited new patients. "Get them before the doctor down the street does," they pander. After looking back over nearly 20 years and interviewing countless DCs to join my staff, I decided to share my experiences related to new patient acquisition. Some of you may have attempted these ideas yourself; others like a full-length "infomercial" may be awaiting you.

When I began my practice in the winter of 1983, I was motivated by the accumulated knowledge I had acquired in chiropractic college. Success and prosperity seemed inevitable, for I had emerged with a sufficient "chip on my shoulder" related to the ignorant average American consumer and the oppressive American medical establishment. Chiropractic was the vehicle to carry the masses to the promised land, and I was its self-appointed driver.

To get started, I did what many doctors do: I returned to my hometown. That plan proved to be a winner. My family was large, and new doctors were scarce. My heart was in the right place, but my head was in the clouds. Nine months into it, a great awakening occurred: learn this business or die. Getting new patients was slow, and the lack of proper office procedures and programs did not prompt others to refer.

Just short of getting religion, I got organized! Truth be known, I shunned the advice of respected mentors and joined a practice management group. The groups tutelage brought essential structure to my practice. New patients were now ushered through a systematic process. With unwavering compassion and empathy, I channeled them through a step-by-step evaluation, x-ray and report. I mailed each new patient a "welcome" letter and literature before heading home on their first day. They received a call from me following their first adjustment. The lay lecture was not new; it just lasted an hour less than the dissertation I had previously delivered. My staff - my wife, in this case - learned how to explain financial matters with patients. We were paid when patients came in, not after they left and we billed them five times. Using travel cards to keep records and eliminating the "hallway hostess" added enormous sanity to an otherwise frantic office. I referred re-evaluations, re-reports, and taught people on every visit through touch and tell. The public was blown away by "internal marketing" via organization, compassion and competence.

External marketing began with the Yellow Pages. Believe it or not, only one other chiropractor and I placed 1/4 page adds with our photos in the directory. I averaged 22 new patients each month. The next year, my ad went up 30% and I was relegated to page three due to the huge sales campaign the Yellow Pages launched, backed by my success.

After two years, I made the big move: mall screenings! In 1986, mall shows were all the rage. I signed up 103 people for complimentary evaluation during my first show. Eighty showed up, and 58 followed through with adjusting recommendations. Mall shows were great if you were willing to prepare, confront, and ask for their business in exchange for some incentive. The biggest challenge dealing with the public one-on-one is answering questions on the spot. It is a fantastic experience that will reveal you to yourself very quickly.

Next on the new patient acquisition list was the use of four-color, full-page inserts in the local newspaper. Education with an incentive was the continued theme. Colorful and broadly informative, the inserts went out by the thousands, and the patients came in by the dozens. I came to realize marketing was simply a numbers game and not personal. Looking at it one way, I bought patients. Looking at it another way, I had a responsibility to tell the public what I did because it was so unique. The inserts worked for nearly two years.

From late 1987 through 1989, my practice attracted between 75-100 new patients per month. Those numbers may frighten a single doctor, and they caused me some stress, but the point is, there is no scarcity of patients in the market place today. Times may have changed, and the game has some new players and new rules, but you have to either find ways to stay in the game or settle for what you get.

One event I have never stopped using is the annual "Patient Appreciation Day." I learned this approximately 4-5 years into my practice and decided to use it as an anniversary celebration. It is indeed a cause for celebration. My staff and I will announce the specific day a month in advance, with colorful banners made for the reception area. We send mailers to our existing patient base and meet as a staff to plan each person's role during the event. The appreciation day always takes place on a Saturday, with tables containing chiropractic literature placed in the reception area corners; a VCR showing chiropractic educational tapes; helium balloons; a raffle; and the incentive: *no charges for the evaluation and any x-rays*. I generally process 25-30 new patients with the help of my associate.

I have tried other marketing tactics that did not work as well but may work for you. Web advertising has been a bust so far; TV advertising done haphazardly was a mistake, and talk radio show may have worked better had I not been on Sunday evening after an NFL team that didn't win a game all season!

My impressions of marketing after all these years are as follows:

- Never stop internal marketing through kindness, courtesy, cleanliness, respect and competence;
- Budget 3-5% of your gross income to market annually;
- Be prepared to alter your procedures or facility to accommodate growth;
- Build one marketing effort on another;
- Market your system of practice, not your skill as the DC.

In 1999, an ad in *Dynamic Chiropractic* caught my eye. Soon after that, a colleague told me about a "chiomercial." I had seen great chiropractic tapes before, but none that allowed or were intended to be shown on television. The chiomercial described what subluxations are, how we get them, what they can cause, and why chiropractic is invaluable. This program allowed my practice to insert four 60-

second scripted incentives for the viewer to act on. What excited me about this new medium was how many ways you could build around it: direct mailers; other 30-60 second TV spots; in-office showings; and as a point of reference during the history taking and report. To my surprise, it gave both myself and the patient a reference point!

The 60-second spots inserted during the show featured myself with two associates. This allowed the viewer to connect a face to the practice; they were fun and easy to make using a teleprompter in a professional studio. Following minor editing to the master tape, we were ready for the airwaves in a matter of days.

The program contained so much information, you had to watch it many times to grasp it all. One patient, the wife of a local physician, told me she had seen "both" shows. Others liked the "satisfaction or your money-back guarantee," but most were looking for answers and results. As you might expect, we gave them both. After five months, my statistics showed an increase of over 2,000 office visits compared to the five months before I aired the show.

I have also printed direct-mail pieces that use the logo from the chiromercial. They explain the special offer made during the show; feature a photo of my associates and myself; and tell when the program is shown on TV. For an added fee, the mail house can select certain zip codes, age groups, income levels and homeowners I want to target with the mailer.

Marketing is a critical and essential component to establishing and maintaining a business. A famous quote attributed to B.J. Palmer supports my position: "Good advertising is a salesman talking to hundreds of customers at once."

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