

The Public's View of Chiropractic Marketing

A MESSAGE TO TAKE TO HEART

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The Ontario Chiropractic Association (OCA) and the Canadian Chiropractic Association (CCA) recently released the results of two separate but identical surveys on the public's attitude regarding chiropractic marketing practices. The surveys' findings reveal that while consumers exhibit confidence in chiropractors as a whole, several marketing practices typically offered by some chiropractors may diminish those feelings of confidence.

The OCA survey was conducted by the Environics Research Group, with the results based on a phone survey conducted among a representative sample of 1,103 adult Ontarians from Dec. 8-23, 2005, with a margin of error of plus/minus 3 percentage points. [DC did not receive a copy of the CCA survey for analysis in time for publication; however, CCA representatives stated that their findings were not statistically significantly different from those of the OCA survey.] According to the OCA survey, the marketing practices identified as most troubling to consumers included the use of prepayment plans, free or discounted services, mall displays and "unreasonable" numbers of treatments.

Confidence in chiropractors. The study did give chiropractors some good news in that it found high levels of public confidence, especially among current patients. Confidence was lower than average among nonusers, but even within this group, survey participants were more likely to have "some" confidence than "very little." Among current chiropractic patients, 72 percent said they have a great deal of confidence in chiropractors. Among nonusers, 15 percent said they have a great deal of confidence, 41 percent have some confidence, 22 percent have very little and 14 percent have no confidence. Residents of Northern Ontario and those living in midsized communities were more likely to have a great deal of confidence in chiropractors.

Offers for discounted or free services. Chiropractors should consider that according to the survey, free or discounted services such as coupons, handouts or advertisements for free services, have little impact on a person's decision to consult a chiropractor, and in some cases, may even have the opposite effect. Almost 75 percent of survey respondents said that such an offer would have no impact on their decision to see a chiropractor; another 10 percent said that discounted or free services would actually make them less likely to consult a chiropractor. Only 11 percent of survey participants said offering a free or discounted consultation would make them more confident in the chiropractic profession; 23 percent said it would make them less confident in the profession.

Prepayment plans for services. Long-term prepayment plans for chiropractic services elicited a zero tolerance response from study participants. Sixty percent of participants believed that if a chiropractor offered a discount for prepayment of services, the chiropractor was "probably promoting unnecessary services"; 39 percent noted that offering discounted prepayment plans made them less confident about the chiropractic profession. Almost half (43 percent) said there should be no prepayment for services at all, and only three percent believed it appropriate for a chiropractor to offer a prepayment plan for

more than 10 visits. Among younger study participants (18-29 age group), a slight majority favored prepayment plans of up to five visits, but there was no demographic group in which more than 12 percent favored prepayment plans exceeding five visits.

Other marketing practices. Another marketing option chiropractors might need to reconsider is the use of certain mall displays to attract new patients. While survey respondents expressed a generally favorable view of information displays in malls and other areas as a means of educating the public, 27 percent said that performing clinical examinations or screening procedures in malls or other public places made them less confident in the chiropractic profession, while 56 percent said it made no difference to their perceptions. Researchers concluded that "marketing practices in which chiropractors directly address consumers with the expressed purpose of encouraging new visits poses risks in terms of public confidence."

Study participants also expressed their opinions about what they consider "unreasonable" numbers of treatments. A majority said they would refuse or discontinue treatment if a chiropractor recommended a number of treatments that seemed "unreasonable" to them. Even among those who said they would respect the chiropractor's judgment, 89 percent said they would advise a patient to seek a second opinion if their chiropractor recommended a number of unreasonable treatments. Of the majority who recommended a second opinion, almost 70 percent said that opinion should come from a health care professional other than a chiropractor.

Commentary

A percentage of chiropractors throughout the U.S. and Canada utilize the marketing tactics detailed in the OCA survey. These results provide insight into how the public perceives these marketing plans. These findings should encourage DCs to take a fresh look at their business plans and how they build their practices. Doing so may help maintain the confidence of their current patients, as well as build up that necessary new patient base. It's always important to consider the consumer perspective - particularly as the profession fights to establish an identity the public can relate to and appreciate.

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FEBRUARY 2006