

The Language of Marketing

TURNING ACQUAINTANCES INTO NEW PATIENTS

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Think for one moment about how many of your current patients were once complete strangers or, at best, acquaintances. Chances are, most of them were. For chiropractors, the objective of marketing is to build relationships with relative strangers so they become comfortable and motivated enough to allow you to care for them. This process can take a few minutes or several encounters. Either way, the steps are the same: getting attention, gaining familiarity, sharing information and giving the individual an experience of you and the necessary time to conclude there is something in it *for them* to work with you. If your goal is to convert strangers and acquaintances into loyal patients, one of the most important skills to master is the ability to understand and use the language of marketing.

This specialized way of communicating goes far beyond delivering smooth sound bites. It does not involve a hard sell or require manipulative, leading questions. The language of marketing is one that others can hear and understand. It's verbal communication that is meaningful to the person on the receiving end. It requires the practitioner delivering the message to be fully present, demonstrate genuine interest in others, convey empathy and put the desires of the listener (in this case, a potential new patient) first. If you would like to become fluent in the language of marketing, read on to learn how you can turn acquaintances into new patients and grow your practice.

Fluency in Action

One of my chiropractor clients recently told me a story so powerful that I asked if I could use it in one of my columns. He agreed. This chiropractor prefers to remain anonymous, but here is the account of what took place at his gym one day.

Last Thursday, I was late getting to the gym for my workout. When I entered the weight room, the usual crowd was replaced mostly by people I didn't know. As I was doing my stretches, I overheard a conversation among three people exchanging shoulder war stories.

Prior to learning the language of marketing, my inclination would have been to plug in my iPod, walk past the group after giving a quick nod, and proceed with my workout. I chose to remain unplugged. One member of the group greeted me with, "Hello, Doc," which in the past, would have really made me want to plug in. I'm not antisocial, but my tendency before would have been not to engage because I was in a hurry to get my workout done. I stopped, and with the confidence I'd gained from studying marketing language, briefly interacted with the group. Knowing marketing syntax, I could tell the level of interest of the guy with the shoulder problem.

I was able to offer my audio logo including who I work with, how I help them and offering

an example. I spoke with him for maybe four minutes about his shoulder and before I left, I gave him my card. He called the next day for an appointment and showed up in the middle of a snowstorm!

This client engaged in what I can only call perfect marketing behavior. He was alert, gauged the individual's level of interest, shared meaningful information in the right dose, and then simply offered his business card along with a brief invitation for his new gym acquaintance to call the office for more information or a treatment. He didn't do a hard sell on Mr. Shoulder. He didn't examine the guy right there in the weight room. And he didn't rattle on ad nauseam about anything and everything he knows related to shoulder injuries and how to fix them. No, our anonymous chiropractor engaged his marketing brain and used the language he needed in the moment to turn this acquaintance (stranger, really) into a new patient. You can learn to do the same thing.

Marketing language is based on syntax - a particular order of communication that creates meaning and evokes a specific reaction. The order in which letters appear in a word gives that word a certain meaning; the order of words in a sentence makes it understandable; and the order of sentences within a paragraph creates an impact for the reader. Likewise, the order and way in which you present your marketing message determine the meaning, understanding and impact on the listener.

The Marketing Message

A potential patient may not know anything about your services, whom you work with, or the kind of results you produce. Or if they do know, they might have misconceptions or biases about what you do. Before you can begin any kind of meaningful dialogue, you must have an individual's attention and interest. The initial aim in the marketing process is to establish a connection with an individual and then offer a brief, concise message that communicates the essence of what you do. This means sharing the basics, rather than everything you know and especially not delving into how your services work (e.g., the process and mechanics, your philosophy, credentials).

ENGAGE WITH AUTHENTICITY

If every conversation you have with potential patients feels like drudgery or just hard work, you'll be more likely to plug in your iPod and keep to yourself than engage and possibly find your next new, loyal patient. Starting with the very first conversation or encounter with a potential new patient, keep in mind that authenticity on your part is paramount. Because you will only engage in marketing conversations that feel natural to you, avoid using scripts or canned language. Be clear ahead of time what it is that you stand for, what you consistently deliver to patients, what those patients feel and experience when working with you, and how they benefit in concrete ways. Be confident in conveying what you have to offer, and yet keep the focus on the person you are speaking with.

Rather than answering the question, "What do you do?" with a label like "I'm a chiropractor," and then launching into a monologue about your services, offer a message that gets attention. Always remember that the person with whom you are speaking, whether at a health fair or a dinner party is asking themselves: "What's in this for me?" Stay focused on the listener's needs rather than on your own, and you will be more likely to engage in a meaningful conversation. Presenting yourself and your marketing message to a potential new patient involves three specific steps and possibly a fourth, depending on the person's level of interest.

1. *Communicate clearly with whom you work:* "Most of my patients are midlife individuals and

baby boomers determined to stay strong and healthy well into their retirement years."

2. *Offer an example of common problems, challenges, issues, and concerns that the patients you work with have:* "My patients have the usual problems associated with no longer being 25 - neck and back pain, joint stiffness, chronic pain and weekend-warrior injuries. It's all manageable. It just requires some attention and effort on their part and mine."
3. *If the conversation goes further, provide examples of the kinds of results you achieve:* "I worked with a patient recently who'd had several surgeries for low back pain. She just kept getting worse with each operation. After a few months of treatment in our office, she was playing tennis again for the first time in almost a decade."
4. *If the potential patient continues to express interest at this point by sharing something about themselves, you can tell a story to engage them - one that relates to their need or interest:* For example, if the individual says they've considered chiropractic for a nagging neck problem, you could say, "One patient came to me with persistent, disabling neck pain. He'd tried everything, but nothing helped, and he was feeling pretty hopeless. We customized a treatment plan for him and within two months his neck was markedly improved and his overall energy and enjoyment of life returned. Now, about a year out, he rarely has pain."

The purpose of an initial conversation is not to get the prospect to sign up for care or "buy," but to pique their curiosity, perhaps help them see where they may have gaps in their knowledge base, and get them to ask for more information. At this point in time, you simply want the potential patient to have a stake in the conversation and explore *what might be in it for them* to engage with you (during this current conversation, not to mention future care). Stay focused on their immediate concerns and think about what and how much they need to know at this time. Assuming a person remains interested, you can then move the conversation forward by letting them know you understand their problem by demonstrating empathy and sharing, in slightly more detail, how you can help them.

The Right Information at the Right Time

Most practitioners launch into a far-too-detailed process of what they do and ramble on ad infinitum about their approach and philosophy, when they should be focusing on the one thing that's really on the patient's mind which is: "What do I have to gain by becoming your patient?" At this point, the practitioner's job is to answer that question without being pushy. By understanding the patient's genuine needs and desires, you can address their obvious question of, "What's in it for me?" and in so doing, begin to establish trust and credibility. Here's an example:

The potential patient says (upon finding out you are a chiropractor): "Two different chiropractors I've seen have recommended treatments that seemed like they'd take forever. One doctor was even talking about twice weekly visits for a full year, which there is no way I can afford. Can't you just do something quick to get me out of pain?"

What you're tempted to say: "Well, there's research to show that with this type of injury there are valid reasons for... It may seem expensive, but studies have shown... In my practice I always... My experience has been that... Those other chiropractors probably..." And soon the person's eyes glaze over.

What you should say instead: "I hear your concern about the cost of care. Health care costs are getting a lot of attention lately, with good reason. What is your understanding about your previous chiropractor's recommendations? Why do you think they suggested what they did? What do you hope to achieve from chiropractic care that you haven't had results from elsewhere?"

No matter how many scripts you've read or used over the years that sound good to you, know that even a semi-savvy patient can tell when you're giving them information only in an attempt to get them to sign on for treatment. Obviously, if a patient starts asking for more detail about your process, your experience or what research shows, you'll answer them.

Converting Interested Individuals Into Active Patients

This phase of marketing involves helping someone who is interested become someone who is committed to moving forward with care. It's a step that cannot be rushed. Patients are looking for substantive, individualized answers to their questions. "Can you help me?" "Why do I need this service?" "What results can I expect?" "How does this all work?"

While clinical questions will obviously arise at this stage in the process, this conversation is not a clinical or diagnostic interview. The patient is assessing whether you are credible, trustworthy and caring. Your main objective should be to assess the patient's situation and be present and empathetic as you answer their questions honestly.

MARKETING IS A TWO-WAY STREET

Keep in mind that marketing is not just about getting new patients; it's about assessing the new patients. Patients make assessments about whether or not to work with you, and you should be simultaneously qualifying patients to determine if you want them in your practice. Is this person genuinely interested in better health? Are they ready to take action? How likely is this individual to follow through with a treatment plan? Do you offer what this particular patient needs? Before moving too quickly into converting a prospect into a new patient, think about a patient in your practice you wish you'd never met. Think back to when you first encountered this person. Did you encourage him, even push him a little? Did you assume that because he was "willing" that you had to take him on as a patient? Were there red flags from the get-go? I pose these questions to drive home this point: You don't have to take every patient. It's okay to play a little hard to get. Not in a coy or insincere way, but rather with a genuine interest in building the kind of practice you look forward to going to each day. As you work to convert interested individuals into new patients, remember that marketing is a two-way street.

You may need to spend more time in conversation, or this may be an opportunity to give the patient written materials about their condition, offer a complimentary consultation or invite them to attend an educational class you are offering. Again, instead of delving too deeply into your process and philosophy, continue to collect information from the patient that will help you partner with them in providing care. Some helpful questions for digging a little deeper into an individual's motivation include:

- What kinds of results or outcomes would make a difference to you?
- What would the impact of achieving these results be in your life?
- What is important to you in your relationship with a health care provider?
- How will you know you are making progress?

At this point, if it's clear the individual with whom you are speaking is reasonably interested in becoming a patient (and you'd like to have them in your practice), now is the time for a simple call to action. Without being pushy, offer the person your business card and say, "If you'd like to make an appointment, give my office a call. I'm fairly certain we can work together in a way that will meet your objectives and help you feel better." Assuming you've conveyed your marketing message successfully,

expect your office phone to ring.

Marketing Fluency Equals Sustainable Practice Growth

Effectively using the language of marketing involves practicing restraint, being curious and not assuming you know what someone needs before connecting with them enough to really find out. It's about learning not to overcommunicate. In subtle ways throughout all of your interactions with potential patients, you should be considering how to build your practice by conveying whom you work with, the problems you address, the results you produce, and - in strict moderation - how you do what you do. The key word here is *subtle*. Even in your calls to action, keep in mind that pushing too hard, too fast will drive away the very patients you want to attract.

You can grow your practice with less struggle and erase the mystery that so often surrounds attracting new patients by developing and using the language of marketing. The solution to almost all marketing challenges is developing yourself professionally and increasing your marketing know-how, including communication. A new tactic or script will not help you market more effectively. Successful marketing is something that you incorporate into your practice on a daily basis. Let your office be your learning laboratory - your personal seminar - as you hone your language skills with each patient encounter.

MAY 2008