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Marketing 101: A Practical Guide for the Sleep Lab

Throughout history, physicians and clinics have generally taken the approach of “if you build it, they will come”. Patients needing specialty services had limited choices as to who would provide their care, or where it would be provided. How do you get the word out to your patients and to the referring physicians that you are better than your competition? This article will give you some tips that have helped our lab, Sleep Insights, in Rochester New York.

Over the last decade, more physician specialists have been completing fellowships and seeking subspecialty credentials. There has also been a steep increase in the emergence of diagnostic sleep labs in most markets. Meanwhile reimbursements are being cut. With all of this competition, physicians and clinics have begun to look into marketing and advertising as a way to increase patient base, and maintain profitability in a complicated marketplace. With that in mind, how does one get the word out on the street? We have looked at it from two different standpoints: direct marketing to the patient and direct marketing to the physician. The challenge is to do this in a way that appears professional and maintains your credibility, avoiding the appearance of a discount outlet or a used car dealership.

Direct marketing to the patient should be classy and topic-specific. We have tried utilizing informational ads that promote a sleep health fair, or highlight our involvement in a trade

fair, where we promote healthy sleep. We run ads in several media venues directing patients to attend the events. By doing this we accomplish two things. First we have maintained credibility for not asking patients directly for their business, thus separating us from “sales”. Second, we have gotten name recognition out in the community for promoting health and the event itself. The event educates our patients, and we generate referrals from the people that attend the event.

Direct marketing to the physician is also a crucial piece of the marketing puzzle. In our market, 80% of the patients need referrals before we can provide services. Marketing to your referring doc needs to be done in such a way that you do not waste their time, keep in mind that most doctors have extremely tight schedules. They may only have a second for you (or your marketing materials), and it will be a quick one at that. Your marketing presentation needs to be brief, and point specific. You will be well served by establishing good relationships with the front office staff. Everyone in the healthcare business knows that the administrative staff greatly influences the referral process. If you do not make a good impression on them, or provide them with prompt, courteous, and convenient service, they will not refer their patients to you.

Before starting out on a marketing campaign, you will want to establish a budget and stick to it. While establishing your budget, you will also want to establish a method of measuring your return on investment (R.O.I.). To calculate R.O.I, you will need to know how many patients you will have to gain in order to recoup your advertising expenditure. Most media sales people will try to establish a several-thousand dollar campaign to span over months. Be careful here, assess your budget first and the attitude of the community you are in. If you live in a conservative area, a large scale marketing campaign could make you look unprofessional. You may benefit more from short bursts of a theme-specific nature, promoting a different aspect of health benefits each time. Try out several venues, including print, TV, and radio. Ask each of your patients how they heard about you. If most of their answers are “my doctor sent me here”, you may want to spend more time marketing to your physician referral sources. If your patients are seeing or hearing your ads, then stick with what you are doing. In either scenario, a successful marketing campaign can and will help generate referrals, and ultimately help you stand out from your competition.

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