

You Never Get a Second Chance to Make a First Impression

Many of you reading this article have heard me say this many times, most recently when I was speaking this past July to third year residents who are preparing for their first round of negotiations/interviews with prospective employers. The first impression you make with a future employer can make or break the opportunity. In the same way, the first impression you make with a potential patient can lead the patient to your office or turn the patient away. First impressions are an important part of marketing you and your medical entity. When beginning the interview process, if the prospective employer likes what they see, negotiations will proceed. Similarly, if the prospective patient likes what they first see, the patient will proceed with making an appointment with you.

Years ago, throughout the State of Florida, Physicians were restricted by the Medical Societies from putting an advertisement in the newspaper that was larger than two inches by three inches and could only show your name, address, telephone number and specialty. Marketing medical entities has certainly changed. Now, not only do medical entities use marketing tools such as web sites, television is becoming a regular marketing tool as well. Today, many times the first impression is simply whether or not you have a web site. A large number of patients today even when they are referred and regardless of age, seniors included will look for a web site to find out what they can about providers, location, hours of operation, insurance and even patient registration forms. A web site is an opportunity for a first impression. If you do not have a web site, schedule a meeting with a web site consultant that has experience with medical entities in your area to assist with establishing your web site. Also, you need to monitor the "hits" your web site gets as a way of determining how effective the site is.

If you are considering television marketing, the content of the message is important but also you need to consider when your message appears during the day. Is 10am Mondays and Thursdays the appropriate time, as an example, for your message to be seen by your target market? There are so many facets of web site and television marketing that you should at least in the beginning seek professional assistance. As with many of the other procedures you adopt in establishing business procedures, you must monitor effectiveness.

Another way to do the monitoring is to add to your patient questionnaire a section asking if they used your web site or television advertisement when making a decision to make an appointment with your entity. Once you add this section, your office manager/ administrator should provide a report at least monthly showing how the new patients found out about your medical entity. This monthly report should include the web site and or television information as

well as other sources such as patient referrals. You want to know where your referrals are coming from and where they are not coming from so you can adjust your marketing plan to reach more potential patients. Also, using your practice management system to run a zip code report showing where your patients reside can be helpful in determining where you need to focus additional marketing effort.

Recently, I saw a client marketing message on television about 5:30am. The message showed the respective doctors names in a line across the screen. The name on the left side of the screen was cut off and the name on the right side of the screen was cut off. A prospective patient's first impression could be negative based on the presentation. When I asked why all names did not show correctly, I was told that the message was prepared in "High Definition" and I must not have been on a high definition channel. How technical we have become.

Years ago I attended a conference sponsored by my professional organization and a new topic beyond tax and practice management was added to the agenda. Marketing for Medical Offices was the new agenda item. Obviously I was interested and attended. The presenter's message was that the best marketing tool for any entity is "Have Your House in Order". It made sense then and it makes sense now. Is your house in order? Location. Location. Location. Your physical location, many times can not be easily changed, however, you can make sure that patients can easily find your office, the outside is trash free and that there is appropriate parking. A first impression of what they are entering.

Let's continue with the "reception area". Many medical entities mistakenly refer to the reception area as the "waiting room". This is a marketing problem. The name waiting room implies that it is an area focused on waiting. Patients should be "received" in a reception area where they are first greeted by staff that gives the impression that the patient's visit is important and they are there to help make the visit as pleasant as possible. Recently, I made a visit to a client's office to drop off a document. When entering the "reception area", I went to the counter where two staff members were sitting and I stood in front of them for more than a minute before one of them lifted her head to greet me. One was reading and the other was texting on her cell phone. Something was more important than me. What could be more important than making me feel welcome? I could have been a new patient or an established patient. During my monthly meeting with the client, we discussed this event when discussing how to do a better job marketing the entity.

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Is the reception area comfortable in terms of seating arrangements, traffic flow, and lighting? Do you use single seating chairs? Multiple seating arrangements usually waste space as patients are not comfortable sitting in that arrangement with someone they do not know. Arms on

chairs assist patients getting up and down. Coffee tables take up space and can be a hazard to some patients. Does the lighting in the reception area present an area that is warm and friendly? The reception area is the patient's first impression of the interior of the facility

Your web site and other marketing tools will tell the patient your office hours. Does your staff answer the phones throughout your office work day? Does your staff use staggered staff lunch breaks so the phones can be answered throughout the work day? Many patients that work during the day will call during their lunch break. Does your staff get in late or leave early with phones un- attended or checked out to an answering service? Does your staff answer the phone in a positive manner giving the patient an implied message they/ you are here to help them? A first impression on how easily a patient can reach medical assistance.

You, the doctor, are the leader. The staff follows your lead. If you are casual about getting to the office on time to see patients if there was/ is no emergency, the staff will follow your lead. If your marketing materials say that you start seeing patients at 8:30am you and your staff need to be in the office earlier than 8:30am to get organized for the day. Time is valuable to patients as well. Office hours can be staggered so you can have evening hours and Saturday morning hours for example to help accommodate patients. A first impression as to how organized and accommodating the entity is.

Appearance can be a touchy issue. How do you and your staff appear in the eyes of your patients? Do you and or staff members appear tired when you see patients? Are you and your staff dressed appropriately? If you have a dress code for your office, is it being followed? Generally each medical entity has a staff entrance that is not usually used by patients. Put a floor length mirror just inside the staff door so when you and your staff arrive in the morning a quick look will show you and your staff how you/they will appear in the eyes of your patients. Appearance gives a first impression about you personally.

The above are a few items to consider when thinking about marketing. This discussion it is not totally inclusive. However, with more and more physicians using electronic medical records I have one more thought for this time. When you are in the examination room with patients, try your best to keep eye contact with the patient. The other day, I asked my wife about her visit to her doctor. She said it was kind of strange. I asked why and she said " he was focused on his laptop instead of me".

You can spend a lot of time and money on marketing strategies and materials but if you don't appear to be focused on what is best for the patient you may not get a second chance.