



# Marketing to the Social Physician

Marketing to physicians may just be the next great frontier in healthcare marketing, enabled in part by the rise of online communities and social media. The emergence of these contemporary marketing vehicles represents an opportunity for organizations to engage physicians in a manner that could not have been possible in the past.

The way in which most hospitals market to physicians has not changed significantly in the last 20 years. What's more, physician marketing is seldom a priority and is often overshadowed by service line or product marketing, despite the fact that physician referrals are still the primary drivers of volume for hospitals, even in this age of consumer-driven healthcare. Further, it is not uncommon for physician relations departments to handle physician communications, rather than having this function integrated into the organization's overall marketing program. Today, when it comes to physician outreach, most hospitals rely on tried and true methods, such as CME courses, direct visits from physician liaisons,

occasional direct visits from physicians, direct mail, physician directories, and networking events.

### A New Approach to Engagement

In the end, marketing to physicians (physician relations) has always been about building and nurturing relationships with referring physicians. Traditionally, this engagement was done through face-to-face encounters. But face-to-face connections among hospitals, hospital-based physicians, and referring physicians are not nearly as common as they once were, in large part due to the work life of the modern physician. This means that traditional communications tactics must be supplemented with contemporary



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marketing vehicles, such as social networks, to form a comprehensive physician marketing program. In this paradigm, the integration of the old with the new is paramount.

So how can the hospital marketer use new media and social networks to reach physicians? There are a number of possible avenues:

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## Trends That Make a Difference

Several significant changes in recent years suggest that there may be better ways of marketing to today's physicians. Consider the following:

◆ The life of the private practice physician has changed dramatically. According to a study by the Physicians Foundation (*The Physicians' Perspective*), physician morale is suffering dramatically in the current healthcare environment. Within that survey, 78 percent of physicians said medicine is either "no longer rewarding" or "less rewarding." These doctors are looking for work-life balance and are less willing to commit to extracurricular activities outside of the practice.

◆ Physicians have embraced the Internet and have begun to join social networks in significant numbers. According to a Manhattan Research study published in early 2009, 99 percent of doctors are online daily (75 percent for professional purposes), 85 percent maintain broadband in their offices, and 83 percent consider the Internet essential to their practice. Meanwhile, 60 percent of U.S.

physicians are either actively using social media networks or are interested in doing so.

◆ Physician-only social networks have begun to find an audience. Sermo, one of the largest online physician-only networks, now boasts a membership of more than 100,000 physicians. Meanwhile, Medscape, WebMD's online health professional network, claims to have an audience of 613,000 physicians in more than 30 specialties. Physicians are using these networks to communicate with peers and access up-to-date medical information.

◆ Marketing has fundamentally changed with the advent of social media, becoming far more focused on engagement and ease of access to credible information versus traditional corporate marketing. Today, successful marketing programs are designed to fit within the life of the target audience and provide opportunities for information sharing. They are audience-centric rather than organization-centric, which is a fairly dramatic shift.

◆ **Engage physicians through physician-only social networks.**

Identify physician leaders who are ideal candidates for representing your organization within these networks, and then put them to work networking on the organization's behalf. Think of the physician-only network as the doctor's lounge of 2011.

◆ **Advertise the organization's services and specialists through physician-only social networks.**

Networks like Sermo and Medscape allow messaging to be targeted to physicians geographically and by specialty.

◆ **Develop physician-only online networks targeting referring physicians in your region.** Given its appeal to physicians and other

professionals, LinkedIn is an ideal tool for this purpose. MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, TX, an organization that is ahead of the curve in embracing social networks to reach physicians, has an active LinkedIn group with 347 members, along with a Twitter feed and Facebook group designed specifically for referring physicians.

◆ **Develop a Twitter feed that provides content for the referring physician audience.**

Share information about staff physicians, new programs, and technologies within top specialties. Twitter can also be used to communicate information about upcoming CME programs and traditional networking events.

◆ **Turn physician leaders into bloggers.** Develop a physician-to-physician blog written by the

organization's top physicians. To take the pressure off of any one physician, use a team of 8 to 10 specialists who can each contribute one blog post each month.

Consider videotaping physicians as if they were speaking to their peers, addressing issues that are of particular relevance to referrals. This type of video is both authentic and compelling. Short video blog posts enrich the content of the blog and enhance the experience of the visiting physician.

Through the blog, referring physicians will get to meet the organization's physicians and get a sense of their personalities and their approaches to the discipline. When human assets are stretched thin, video is perhaps the

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## An Integrated Approach to Physician Marketing: Case in Point

Cooper University Hospital, Camden, NJ, recently implemented a comprehensive physician marketing program that successfully integrates traditional tools with contemporary online platforms. The program is anchored by a traditional newsletter for referring physicians (employed and community-based) titled the *South Jersey Medical Report*. This sophisticated, eight-page color publication features medical information written by physicians for physicians. The *Medical Report* is a highly academic piece, with each issue featuring two of Cooper's signature services (major feature stories) as well as information about clinical trials, physician and new medical staff profiles, advances in care and new technologies, a schedule of upcoming CME programs, and physician relations contact information.

The print publication is just the beginning. On a corresponding microsite ([www.sjmedicalreport.com](http://www.sjmedicalreport.com)), visitors can read articles and view videos featuring Cooper's leading physicians speaking to referring physicians. For each feature story in the *Medical Report*, there is a related physician video. From the microsite, visiting physicians can download electronic versions of the *Medical Report*, meet Cooper's top physicians,

and subscribe to the print edition of the publication.

The physician marketing program also includes a Twitter feed from the *Medical Report* that regularly disseminates content to its physician and consumer followers. Cooper also distributes *Medical Report* content through its "Cooper Connections" LinkedIn group, reaching both medical professionals and area residents who have joined the group. Finally, Cooper uses NPR underwriting to target the physician audience and add yet another point of contact to reinforce its physician marketing effort.

At Cooper, the physician marketing program has been developed through close collaboration among the marketing team, the manager of physician relations, the physician liaisons, and an editorial board comprising 14 physician leaders from within the organization. By being inclusive, Cooper has been able to build support for the program while consolidating the marketing program under a single conceptual umbrella: the *South Jersey Medical Report*. Meanwhile, Cooper has positioned itself as a valuable and relevant resource for area physicians, opening the door to greater familiarity and improved referral relationships.

(Continued from page 11)

next best thing to the direct brand experience. A blog significantly extends the reach of your medical staff without significantly taxing their resources.

◆ **Develop a sophisticated online physician portal.** Anticipate what physicians need in order to make referrals, and make all the necessary tools and information readily available through the portal. These tools might include online feedback forms for referring physicians and a statement of the hospital's philosophy regarding such issues as sharing information with referring physicians and patient return practices.

A comprehensive portal might also enable referring physicians to view patient appointments and reports online and send secure messages to specialists. These are elements that offer value to referring physicians because they save time and help them keep track of the patients they refer.

### A Team Effort

Marketing to busy physicians is challenging at best. Capturing their attention and persuading them to change long-standing referral patterns takes a concerted effort on the part of the entire organization, not just the marketing team. A successful marketing program will provide information that is both relevant and easy to access, fitting into the life of the physician and the gatekeepers within the practice.

With that in mind, a successful program should include elements of both traditional and new media to accommodate the evolving media consumption habits of physicians. It is too early to cast aside newsletters and direct mail as marketing tools, but given physicians' adoption of social media, it is definitely time to integrate social media tactics into the overall physician marketing strategy. ○