

Keep your practice viable: Market yourself

by *Stephanie Bouchard*

Relationship building may be the key

As the trend of doctors leaving private practice to join hospitals and health systems continues, the pressure is on those doctors who aren't leaving private practice. Marketing can help dial the pressure back.

"It's very competitive in the medical field, especially now," said Neil Kirschen, MD, Pain Management Center of Long Island. "It's very rare that doctors are referring to other doctors. People are trying to (keep) everything to themselves. They're trying to form these big mega groups and just refer amongst themselves."

In order to survive, Kirschen said, "People have to hear about you." Kirschen's solution was to hire a professional marketing strategist but that option isn't for everyone, he said. "It's a very useful technique to get your message out provided you have a message."

If hiring a marketing strategist isn't for you, you can still market and do it without spending a lot of money. "Let the community market for you," said Helmut Flasch, medical/dental practice management consultant and CEO of Doctor Relations/Un-Advertising in California.

Times are tough, Flasch said, so get community leaders to spread the word about you. "If you find ways that they promote you and talk about you, it goes wow," he said.

Getting members of a community talking about you – in a positive light – takes your own personal involvement with the community rather than money.

"... people defined marketing as advertising and things that cost money," said Rhoda Weiss, PhD, president of Rhoda Weiss & Associates and editor in chief of the American Marketing Association's Marketing Health Services Magazine. "But in essence marketing is really none of those things. It's really about building relationships. And typically building relationships have little or nothing to do with a brochure."

Building relationships can be as simple as cutting down the wait time in your office or taking the time to talk to other doctors when they call you or it can be coaching a Little League team or participating in one's worship community.

"It's really about understanding what marketing isn't," Weiss said. "It isn't about having big bucks. It isn't mimicking the competition or

worrying about the logo or things like that. It's really developing, maintaining and enhancing relationships with other physicians, patients and the community."

One thing to keep in mind about marketing by building relationships is that it's a slow process, said Kirschen. You won't have patients knocking down your door overnight. Getting your name out in the community is a bit like gardening. The seeds you plant in the community need to germinate.

"It doesn't bring patients to door. They don't say I read your article in the so and so," Kirschen said. "But if you hear enough about a doctor, people come to me and say 'Three or four people told me about you.' ... "That's how you get your best patient referrals. ... 'I've heard that name before. Let's use him.'"

"Doctors do not need to spend money on purchasing advertising when marketing themselves and their practices, experts say. It's all about building relationships."