

# First Impressions and Beyond: Marketing Your Practice in Touch Points—Part I

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# First Impressions and Beyond: Marketing Your Practice in Touch Points—Part I

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Often medical administrators or providers call in a marketing expert when they feel the practice is lacking the growth they want. What's on their mind is usually how to bring in more patients, and they automatically look to external marketing strategies. However, one of the most important elements to successfully marketing a practice is making sure you haven't created a turnstile, where new patients are coming often but not returning or being converted into loyal, referring patients. When new patients are going as quickly as they are coming, you aren't building solid growth. Loyal, referring patients are powerful marketing assets—they are in the community speaking good of you and your practice from first-hand experience. You can create this atmosphere of loyal, referring patients by providing positive touch points that fulfill the needs of your patients. Touch points are the groundwork supporting other types of marketing. This article covers three important touch points that are crucial to a positive patient experience.

**KEY WORDS:** Touch points; marketing; communication; image; evaluate; growth; referring patients.

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*(This is the first part of a two-part series.)*

**T**oo often medical practice administrators or providers wait until they are getting poor results to call in a pro. It's like wellness visits; who wants to go to the doctor when they feel fine, right? Wrong! Whether your practice is *feeling fine* or perhaps not thriving like you thought it would, the sooner the better when it comes to calling in a professional to analyze your marketing vantage point. By the time I get the call, you already want growth *yesterday*. However, intentional, directed growth is best maintained by first laying the groundwork to retain new patients and turn them into strong referral sources that will give your marketing efforts a snowball effect and give you the most bang for your marketing buck.

## WHAT KIND OF GROUNDWORK?

Every interaction with your practice or your brand is a touch point, an opportunity for you to convey a consistent image and message about your practice. I'm talking about what those new patients, who call you because they heard about you from a promotional activity or advertisement, are going to experience when they call or come into your practice.

All the marketing, promotional, and advertising efforts in the world can't overcome mediocre service, or worse: an unanswered phone! Here are three key touch points that have an impact on your patients' experience and, ultimately, how they feel about you.

## How Do You Sound?

Your phone and the person answering it are two of the most important marketing tools you have. Think of your phone as the path a patient has to take into your practice. If the path is riddled with blank signs and potholes, it's unlikely that the patient will refer others or bother following it to the final destination and become a loyal, referring patient.

Essentials of a first-class practice with stellar phone service include:

- **Live coverage during business hours:** Stagger staff lunches if you need to in order to make this happen, but don't stop answering phones at lunch. This protocol will reduce afternoon backup, capture calls of potential new patients that are not willing to leave a message, and convey that you value patients and want to be accessible when they need you.

- **Short wait times:** If you have to put a patient on hold for more than a minute before finding out what he or she needs, it's best to take a message and call the patient back. Respect your patients' time; they may be squeezing this call in during their break time. But be sure you *do* call them back as soon as possible; otherwise, they will keep calling and bog down your phone line, and all the while your level of customer service is compromised. Another important gesture is to ask, "May I put you on hold for a moment?" before you put a patient on hold. If it's not okay, offer to take a message.
- **A designated scheduler:** Often receptionists who are checking patients in are also required to answer phones. Why are we stretching the front line thin, compromising service in two critical areas? Consider separating these tasks between two different employees and having the receptionist as the backup for the phones instead. If your office is busy enough, a full-time scheduler who can be given less urgent administrative tasks to accomplish between calls may be in order.

## How Do You Look?

When we live with something over time, we can lose our ability to see it objectively. That ratty old magazine rack in the reception area doesn't stand out to you, nor do the dusty silk plants and outdated furniture. But your patient just came from Dr. Awesome, so he knows how a top-notch practice looks, and it's clear to him this couldn't be one.

It's very valuable to have an objective set of eyes go through your practice giving you honest feedback, someone who can view things through the eyes of your patients. Do you want to give the impression that you are on top of changes in medicine and that you are trained in the newest, best treatments and procedures? Do you want to express appreciation and value to your patients? You must communicate this through all avenues including the decor, comfort, and cleanliness of your facility.

Here is a starting place checklist:

- Is your space clean? I'm talking about carpet, around the doorknobs, windows, the patient restroom, and office phones/keyboards. It's easy for you to not notice the grime as it slowly builds, but patients see it, and it conveys a lack of care and cleanliness. Is your office tidy? Do patients see taped-up notices and notes and stacks of files, or do they see clean work surfaces and professional communication? By the way, anything important enough to tell your patients can be said to them in person or in your agreement forms, not via a plaque or sign that gives the impression you are running a mill and really would rather not waste your time talking to patients.
- Is your space updated? When did it happen? You moved in five years ago, and it seemed fine, but now it's *really* outdated. If you don't have the budget to do an overhaul, prioritize and break it down by quarters over a year or

two. Large surfaces give the biggest impact: flooring and wall surfaces. A fresh coat of neutral paint, appropriate-to-your-clientele artwork, and a thorough cleaning are good starts. Consider hiring a professional designer—perhaps one who has done offices you have seen and admired; you will save money in the long run by having this person guide you and avoiding costly mistakes.

- Is your space comfortable? Clean and modern are appreciated but you also want to be inviting. Patients are sitting almost the entire time they are in your practice—give them an upholstered seat, warm lighting, plenty of new reading material, and some background music to reduce their perception of the wait they may incur. If older patients visit your practice, chairs with arms are essential for assisting them in getting up and down. Make it pleasant to be in your practice! How about temperature control? Is your receptionist wearing a sweater because she—like the patients—is freezing? And whatever you do, don't room patients too early unless they are miserably ill; it only makes them more anxious for the doctor. The exam room lacks the comforts and distractions of the reception room and will increase their perceived waiting time.
- Is your staff conveying the image you want? Do your staff members look like they belong to a great team—your practice team? To accomplish this, provide scrubs or a uniform for employees that match your practice logo colors. Mismatched scrubs throughout the practice give a discombobulated look that says, "I just work here." Try Greys Anatomy Scrubs or Spa Uniforms, both can be found online. Matching uniforms and nametags with the employee's first name clearly printed in large letters and your practice logo or name on them say, "I belong to a very professional, organized team, and I take my job seriously." It's okay to ask employees to dress to a standard but that standard needs to be a specific written set of expectations that your employees sign in agreement, and you must be prepared to enforce it. Suggestions for items to include would be limiting the amount of jewelry employees wear on the job, color and style of shoes, or cleanliness of nails.

## How Do You Relate?

- **The power of communication:** Patients may not feel good and are likely worried about different aspects of their visit, but you can make them feel better. If your staff members were to greet patients by name and introduce themselves on first visits, it would communicate *volumes* of respect and honor to your patients. Good eye contact, facing your patients as you do intake, and open body language go a long way in showing your patients that in that moment, they are number one. Let your patients know what you are going to do, and why, as you are working or when you have to leave the room—it's

only common courtesy! These acts have proved to be as, if not more, important than the actual amount of time spent with your patient.

- **The front line:** Your receptionist is critical to your customer service because your patients must go through that person to get anywhere in your practice. If the receptionist isn't a ray of sunshine—enthusiastic, helpful, friendly and efficient—he or she may need training or you may need to find a different person for the job.
- **Comfort level:** We talked about keeping the office comfortable with good seating and temperature control, but what about nerves? Your patient is waiting in an exam room, scared about a procedure or a possible diagnosis, wearing a crunchy paper "gown," and staring at a blank wall. If you provide your patients with pleasant visual distractions and a soft cloth gown, I promise you they are going to be more relaxed by the time you see them. They may not be able to pinpoint why they had a more pleasant visit, but surely you'll get the credit!
- **Respecting patients' time:** If you are running behind, let the patient know immediately. Instead of assuming

that she took the whole morning off work to wait in your office, simply ask her if it's going to be okay "if we see you in 30 minutes?" If it's not, offer her the next available appointment. Patients have lives—kids to pick up from school, limited breaks from work, and appointments scheduled after their appointment with you. Show them that you respect their time, and *let them know* what is going on. This open communication will diffuse mounting frustration as patients wait and give them a sense of control. You will find that explaining and apologizing for delays fosters an attitude of cooperation in your patients and mutual respect. Some practices go the extra mile by calling patients that haven't yet arrived when it becomes evident that there will be a long wait—the impact on staff may be enough motivation to find ways to stay on time.

## CONCLUSION

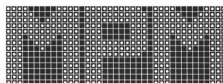
Evaluating these touch points and taking positive action is the first step toward growing a solid practice and supporting your marketing efforts. After all, most practices are built on and strengthened through patient referrals. ■■

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