

Marketing, Retention, and Patient Base

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What are the common points in the strategies employed by growing successful practices?

In the first few weeks of this year, a series of surveys caught my eye. The new statistics coincided from one survey to another on the topmost issues on chiropractor's minds...Patient Retention and New Patient Recruitment. No big surprise there, yet it hangs around like a chronic sore back, refusing to go away. Patient turnover is at an all time high and competition for new patients is a fierce, ever-escalating contest. Recruiting new patients can be a costly, drawn out affair, filled with frustration and uncertain results.

Aside from throwing advertising and gimmick money at the problem, which only lowers your ROI (Return on Investment), there are simple, motivating factors that any practice can find with a little introspection. Further looks into the cause and effect of the situation will provide some information to work with. Every clinic and every patient is different, and what may be your Achilles heel may not be the same for another practice across town.

We know from experience that the best and cheapest form of advertising is word-of-mouth. The trick is nurturing a strong patient base that believes your vision of health. If you don't already have one, your first step is to launch a customer service campaign to earn their hearts and loyalty. Once again, you need to know what will positively work for your practice and your patients.

What would make a person not return...or start going to someone else? Why would they not say anything? Why would they want to put themselves in the hands of a stranger? What went wrong?

A little research into past patients will uncover the most common reasons for patient exodus. There's always a reason.

Let's take a look at some of the more prevalent remarks from ex-patients.

- **Moved to another city or state.**
- **No progress in my recovery.**
- **Therapy too painful.**
- **Was not a covered expense.**
- **Too expensive.**
- **Had no way to get there anymore.**

- **Didn't listen to what I said.**
- **They wanted me to buy stuff I didn't want.**
- **Clinic didn't seem to care.**
- **They changed my doctor**
- **Never gave me a new appointment.**
- **People only wanted my money.**
- **Their people weren't very nice.**
- **Never called to see how I was doing.**

If any of these sounds familiar, you have plenty of company. Unfortunately, this happens even to the best. The good news is that you can reduce it to an acceptable level. The great majority of the above kinks are created by inadequate communication. The solutions can only follow after we find out what the problems are.

Highly underutilized in practices, surveys can provide a gold mine of information which is actionable and inexpensive. Not only will these surveys help you with your current clientele, they may unearth strong phrases to use in your advertising. Once you've gotten strong agreement on recurring answers from patients or public, you can begin to take action.

Being human, we may falter in our resolve to change things around and discontinue programs, features or services that should have stayed in place. Fortunately your practice software, if it is one of the good ones, can help you stay on track. It can make absolutely sure that you never send anyone out of the office without their next appointment. It can remind you of that one patient that always forgets her appointment, or Mrs. Johnson's birthday, or that she prefers Dr. Bill. Software can help you track the effectiveness of your promotional activities and provide statistics to gauge response. In short, most of what you need to correct a decline or accelerate growth is within your reach today.

Depending on what your survey turns up in the form of needed changes (survey your patients twice a year minimum), you can implement a five- to-ten point service campaign that preserves your current roster of clients, while you concentrate on marketing/advertising to bring in new patients. What could the five or ten points to your campaign include? It will all come out in the survey...more communication, temperature of the rooms, ask if hurts, a birthday card, reminders, shorter waits, free pick-up at the home, mints...almost anything.

Even the best-thought-out promotional strategy, including letters, cards, phone calls, service awards for staff, package discounts, newsletters, ads, radio/TV, articles, seminars, earned free services and a host of internet and web applications, will be for naught, if they do not connect with the emotional triggers that patients or the public may have. Find out!

As for the growth of your patient base, chances are that, if your patients are happy with you, they'll bring all their friends with them. And how can you use this to market to the broader public? Let them tell you. Surveys, once again, are the

cornerstones of the future. Surveys, planning, a warm, caring staff and the correct software will keep your practice growing, profitable and full!

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