Your practice doors are open. Now make sure exam rooms are full

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Staff News Writer

Physicians building private practices have more to think about than starting an office and providing care. Doctors each have an individual brand that will help determine their success. Learn some basics about how to define, support and promote your brand.

Choices a physician makes—about specialty, likely patient population, location, practice policies, office amenities, communication skills, commitment to patient satisfaction and education, and so on—are fundamental factors in establishing that brand.

These decisions are part of what set physicians apart from one another and drive patient choices about practice selection. Building and protecting that brand is especially important in an era when patients see themselves as consumers and can broadcast their likes and dislikes through social media.

Private practice—a setting in which physicians are the owners, rather than a hospital, health system or other entity—is itself a choice, and the AMA supports doctors in pursuing the practice arrangement that best suits them individually as they deliver high-quality care to their patients. The AMA offers in-depth resources to consider all practice options and step-by-step guidance for those physicians who want to be their own boss, including the e-book “Starting, Buying, & Owning the Medical Practice.”

“The question about whether or not a physician should build a personal brand and an online presence—that question was probably asked and answered about five to seven years ago,” said ophthalmologist Ravi Goel, MD. He is one of two physicians at a Cherry Hill, New Jersey, private practice. He has spoken on physician marketing at AMA and specialty-society meetings and is a former chair of the AMA Young Physicians Section.

“Patients, no matter what their age—whether they’re millennials or they’re senior citizens—they access the Internet on the computer, their tablet or their phone,” Dr. Goel said. “Typically, they’ll do extensive research, no matter what the specialty is, when they’re looking for a physician.”

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Patients have already met you online

Online presence—minimally, a good website and, for many practices, astute use of social media—combines two elements. One is the information patients need to be even aware that a practice is open for business and can serve their needs. The other encompasses the signals to patients that it is a practice where they will be comfortable receiving care.

Dr. Goel is certain that patients referred to his practice will use Google to search his name—and the scrutiny doesn’t end there. He expects the patients have been “to my practice website, they’ve looked at my YouTube videos, they’ve seen what I posted on Twitter and possibly they’ve looked at my Facebook practice site—and looked at reviews on all those pages,” he said.

For physicians who want to make an impression with potential patients face to face, there are still opportunities at events like health screenings and presentations to community groups. Physicians just starting out in private practice can expect that a personal touch will be important in establishing firm relationships with referring colleagues.

“In my first year of practice, I thought I would be super busy and I wasn’t,” said Dr. Goel. “I decided I would try to have one contact per day” with a potential referring physician. For example, if he saw a patient with diabetes, he would call the primary care physician to give an update and discuss that patient’s care.

Want top ratings? Give top service

At Dr. Goel’s practice, marketing might get patients through the door, but once there the focus is on service. That includes sharply focused attention on reducing wait times at the office.

“A five star-experience means you have to actually respect their time,” he said.

A patient’s good experience and satisfaction with their care will, ideally, result in a positive review and an even stronger brand. Reviews don’t always work out that way.

Physicians are reviewed on a multitude of sites and by patients who range from the profoundly grateful to the determined-to-be disappointed. Practices can encourage positive reviews and should be aware of negative ones. Physicians should search their own names online regularly, and when possible seek to appropriately resolve the situation—sometimes a negative review will be withdrawn.

What won’t go away is the need to keep up to date with an online presence. Dr. Goel’s practice has a polished website. Three years after its launch, he is thinking of an upgrade. “It’s already old.”