

Marketing a Health Care Practice

By

Deanna Mayo

Abstract

Optometrists today are able to provide a wide scope of care in the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of eye disease along with traditional refractive services. Additionally, they may choose to specialize in a particular area of optometry such as pediatrics, low vision, or contact lenses. Often, however, the public is unaware of the services an optometrist can provide or the importance of regular eye exams. Developing and implementing a public relations program can directly benefit an optometric practice in addition to providing an educational public service.

Opportunities to provide public relations include public service announcements (PSA's) in local publications, monthly columns in a local newspaper, patient surveys, and coverage on cable TV. Optometric service organizations and publications are another source of public relations. Participating in vision screenings or providing presentations offers the chance to distribute educational brochures that advertise an optometric practice. For those optometrists willing to make a small investment of their time, a myriad of possibilities exist to generate positive publicity.

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Optometrists today are able to provide a wide scope of patient care in the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of eye disease along with traditional refractive services. While these are the fundamental building blocks of a practice, and the ones we learn in optometry school and continuing education courses, they are only part of the picture of a successful optometric practice. Without the continued return of current patients and the growth provided by new ones, an optometric practice will not reach its full potential. In addition to self-serving reasons for outreach to the public, OD's also have a responsibility to use their knowledge and experience to provide public health education. This is not only for ethical reasons, but also important in upholding our legal responsibility to our patients. The skills of marketing and public relations are an important part of this process.

In the book Career Advocate for the New Practitioner, professional marketing is defined as, "...a planned, systematic process of identifying needs in your practice community, planning ways to meet those needs, and then telling your practice community about your services." Neil Gailmard, Chief Optometric Editor of Optometric Management and chair of American Optometric Association Practice Management University, defines marketing as, "...identifying and satisfying patients' wants and needs – not the doctor's or technician's." In order to maximize a patient base, optometrists must see ourselves as business owners in addition to healthcare providers. This means we need to alert the public to the services we provide. There are many methods to do this. These include the use of exterior and interior signage, marketing to your current patients, generating a newsletter, properly using pamphlets and brochures, maximizing bulletin board and theme displays, maintaining a web site, using an effective appointment system, using surveys, creating a vision care plan, using the local newspaper, and planning and publicizing special events. The financial

considerations of marketing also must be considered. In the following paper these methods of marketing and public relations will be explored.

Exterior Signage

Exterior signage is one area of marketing yourself to the public that is often not given the thought it should. A clearly visible sign, especially in a high-traffic area, takes advantage of a relatively inexpensive source of advertising. Unlike most forms of advertising, a sign is a one-time investment. Because of this, it is worth taking some time to determine what type of sign will best service your practice.

One of the first things to consider is the name and logo you will use. If you already have an established identification that is up to date, it would be logical to include this on the sign. For a new practice, or one that is due for some changes, the name, design and logo of the sign should be part of your overall image. It should be carried through on your business cards, stationary, prescription pads, yellow pages advertisement, and more. You may decide to design the logo and layout yourself, perhaps using one of the many computer programs now available, or you may choose to have it professionally designed. Patients can often remember a picture easier than words, so using a logo in all references to your practice will help the patient to identify and return to it.

In addition to using your name and logo on the sign, you will want to share as much information about the practice as possible. The names and titles of all practitioners as well as any specialty services should be included. Don't focus just on the specialties though - include primary care, contact lenses, and optical services on your sign. A phone number is the last important element.

Your sign should be easily visible to passer-bys. In “Sign Language,” authors Andrew S. Gurwood and Helen M. Kaiser suggest that a sign should be visible from at least 50 feet in all directions from your office. Before installation, look from the roadways and sidewalks to determine the best placement and orientation. The letters also need to be large enough to be seen by a vehicle driving by. Illumination at night is important for maximum visibility. This can be achieved either using internal illumination or an external spotlight.

A well-thought out sign has the potential to be a one-time purchase so consider its flexibility in the long-term. If information on the sign changes, such as the area code or the name of a practitioner, it should be able to be accommodated without getting an entirely new sign. A lighted sign box with an interchangeable plexiglass face is one option along this line.

In considering the design of the sign, pay attention to other signs you see every day. Make notes of what styles you like, in addition to noting which ones are more visible at day and at night, and which ones you remember best. Your budget will also dictate the final design, but starting with some firm ideas will help keep the budget in check. Once you have a plan in mind, compare prices at different sign companies to determine which one will best suit you.

External signs are subject to local ordinances that usually dictate the size, appearance, lighting, and placement. State optometry boards also have their own requirements as to wording, logos, the size of lettering, and the titles you can use to describe yourself. Additionally, if you lease the space for your practice in a multi-office building, there may be regulations by the owner so that all signs have a similar appearance or convey a certain image.

Interior Signage

Signs inside your office have a different purpose than those outside. Your patients have already found your office and you now have a captive audience. Indoor signage should help that audience - your patients - better understand what you do and provide general information. Posters are a type of sign that can serve to educate your patients on subjects such as the effect of diabetes on the eye. Other common signs include ones that list office hours, types of payment accepted, and insurance plans you honor. Signs can also communicate special offers, such as a line of frames on sale. Take the time to coordinate your indoor signage to present a unified look that reflects your office décor. If your staff, or yourself, are frequently asked the same questions over and over, a sign may save the time spent answering the questions.

Richard Kattouf, OD and president and founder of two management and consulting companies, suggests that internal marketing can serve several purposes. It can dispel the idea that competitors carry unique products, such as Lens Crafters “featherweight” lenses, by describing similar products offered at your practice. Kattouf suggests that corporate optometry often does a more effective job of utilizing internal marketing than private practitioners. Internal marketing can also be used to expand existing profit centers such as the plano sunglasses market, which is currently under utilized by independent optometry.

Current patients

When many optometrists think about marketing and public relations campaigns, they tend to focus on attracting new patients. It is important, however, not to overlook your current patients. It is a general rule that it takes less time and money to keep your current

patients than to seek new ones. According to one statistic, it takes six times the cost to attract new patients versus keeping your current ones. Current patients have already used your services, so now your efforts are directed at keeping them coming back. There are many ways to do this.

In the article “5 Degrees of Magnetism,” Randolph Brooks lists five elements that serve as a magnet for keeping existing patients. These include appearance, equipment, recall, available services, and the dispensary. Don’t lose the ability to see your practice with fresh eyes. This means paying attention to cracked walls that you may have stopped noticing a long time ago. Make your practice bright and spacious looking. Don’t hesitate to inform your patients of new equipment you’ve recently purchased. And if you have a certain method of doing things, such as recalling patients, that is no longer working as well as it did in the past, don’t be afraid to change it. Make sure your patients are aware of all the services, such as LASIK, that you offer. Don’t ignore your dispensary, as it is most likely the biggest contributor to your income.

Newsletters

Newsletters are a great way to keep in touch with your patients. If your budget is low, you can design a simple newsletter on your computer using existing software and provided templates. A larger budget may allow professional design and printing. There are many factors and approaches to take when using a newsletter for public relations.

Consider the frequency of publication. A newsletter that only comes out annually will not do much for increasing your patient awareness, while the time and money spent on a

biweekly one may be prohibitive. The length of the newsletter should be fairly short. A single 8.5 x11" paper folded in thirds with space for a mailing label is a simple method.

Subject matter for your newsletter is limited only by your imagination. Make an effort to inform patients of the many services you offer, highlighting new equipment or other updates. Special training, awards, or other recognitions by the doctors or staff can be mentioned.

When selecting topics, have a game plan in mind first. Set up a calendar of topics to cover over the course of a year. These may tie-in to designated national vision celebrations (see Appendix B) that many vision-related organizations sponsor. Once you have the subject selected, think of other ways to tie it in to your practice. As an example, you could use laser vision correction as the topic for a newsletter. To tie in with the newsletter topic, plan a free informational seminar. Generate patient interest by having a spot on the patient history form to inquire about their interest in LASIK surgery and have a sign-up sheet for the informational seminar at the counter. Prepare an in-office binder with testimonies from your successful laser patients. Make sure your staffers can answer questions about LASIK confidently. When the newsletter is received by patients, with the information about the educational event, you will be ready to promote and market the benefits of refractive surgery.

In addition to a regular newsletter, use letters and mailings for special events such as a patient's birthday, a holiday, a special occasion, or announcement. This will let your patients know you are thinking of them and keeping them informed. Postcards are a cost-effective option if you want to publicize a special event, such as a refractive surgery seminar or an open house for a newly remodeled clinic. Depending on the topic, you can send a notice only to a certain demographic sub-population of your patients.

A final suggestion is to contact your appropriate sales reps with topic information and see if they would be willing to contribute towards your printing or mailing costs. Sales reps can also be a good source of topic ideas and can provide additional marketing materials such as charts or diagrams. They may be able to promote certain products in the process. After all, if your sales increase, so do theirs!

Pamphlets & brochures

In-office brochures are a mainstay at doctor's offices. There's a good chance, however, that they aren't being used to their full potential. Make sure the brochures are displayed neatly in an attractive manner. Some organizations, such as the AOA (American Optometric Association), offer a series of brochures for purchase in a wide variety of topics with a unified appearance. (See Appendix A) Other companies, such as drug manufacturers or specialty lens producers, may supply free brochures highlighting their product(s). Make sure the content in the pamphlets is up to date. Always have appropriate educational brochures available at screenings or presentations with your practice information printed on them.

The use of pamphlets and other handouts is also an important method of patient communication and education and therefore plays an important role in risk management. Malpractice litigation is a reality for all health care providers and optimum patient care reduces that risk. In the "Risk Management" chapter of the book Business Aspects of Optometry, John Classe and Lawrence Thal list appropriate communication as one way to minimize risk of injury to patients. One example is managing contact lens patients. The most frequent causes of significant injury with contact lens wearers are contact lens related corneal

abrasions and lack of periodic evaluation of the ocular health of the wearers. Furthermore, extended wear contact lenses have an estimated 4-15 times greater likelihood of complications than daily wear. It is critical that all contact lens wearers are aware of the risks, are given a management plan, and understand the importance of maintaining appropriate follow-up care and periodic ocular examinations. Having a handout to address these issues and documenting that it was given to the patient improves communication and reduces risk. A greater emphasis is put on the importance of reading and following the instructions in a pamphlet when the OD personally gives it to the patient.

Bulletin Boards and Theme Displays

Most optometric practices have bulletin boards somewhere in their office. Use these to their full potential by keeping the information on them current and varied. Theme displays are a great idea. If you are involved in a specialty area, such as sports vision, show photos of the doctors and staff performing screenings on local athletes or professional teams. Post newspaper articles that highlight your practice or staff members. If you fit an athlete with contacts who is now performing well, use their photo and story (with their permission, of course!) Show your patients you support the local teams by displaying autographed hockey pucks or baseballs and team jerseys. Photos of community teams can be framed and displayed. Make sure you let area coaches and trainers know about your services. In exchange for providing vision care for a larger team, you might consider accepting an advertisement in their program. Although the above examples apply to the specialty of sport vision, variations of these ideas can be used for any practice area.

Web sites

In today's technology-based consumer marketplace, a web site is quickly becoming an important, and expected, marketing tool. It gives patients basic information about your practice, including directions, hours, and services, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Dr. Gary Gerber, a practice-building consultant and private practitioner, says a web site should be considered a tool to hold onto the patients you already have, not necessarily to attract new ones.

Developing a web site can seem like an intimidating process. Fortunately, however, there are easy solutions to getting a web-page up and running. Probably the most common way for eye care providers to set up a quick web site is to partner with one of the vendors that offer this service. These vendors are constantly updating and expanding their capabilities, so determine your needs and see which provider best matches your needs. (See Appendix A).

What can a web site do for your patients? It can provide direction in the form of a map, written text, or a link to an Internet site such as Mapquest for custom driving directions. A web site can not only list the services provided by your practice, but also provide educational material or links on related topics. New equipment or changes should be highlighted on the web and photos of the doctor(s), staff, and office can be included. Include your office name, address, and phone number on every page so a patient does not have to search to find it.

An article in the *American Optometric Association Journal* by Gary L. Moss, O.D., M.B.A., F.A.A.O., titled, "Practice Strategies: Making Your Web Site Work for You," states that when developing your web marketing plan, you should address the following questions.

- What do you want the site to accomplish?

- Who do you want to visit?
- What are your target markets?
- What type of practice information would these targets value?
- What do you want visitors to the site to do?

Taking the time to carefully answer the above questions will help provide a starting point for the creating or updating of a web site.

It is a good idea to designate one person to keep the contents of the web page current. While these don't need daily updating, it is easy to let a site lapse and notices of upcoming events that are long past will reflect poorly on your practice. One suggestion is to build up a base of several different articles and rotate them monthly to keep your site from becoming stagnant. Also consider offering on-line only coupons or special offers that change periodically. Patients need to have a reason to come back to your site, and if the content never changes, they won't.

One suggestion to introduce patients to your web page is the following. Set up several pages on your site that provide patient education on common topics such as dry eye treatment options or laser surgery. When you examine a patient with a specific problem or question, ask the patient for his or her e-mail address and later e-mail them the appropriate page. You now have your patient's e-mail address for future e-mailings and he or she may spend time exploring the rest of your web site via your educational e-mail. The patient will also appreciate the extra effort and special treatment received by your following through on their problem.

In a 1998 consumer technology survey by Price Waterhouse Coopers, respondents said they were comfortable spending an average of almost \$300 per purchase via the Internet.

This suggests that most consumers would be willing to purchase eye care products from a web site. In addition to patient awareness, your web site can allow your patients to order their contact lenses from you. Your web site can be served by a contact lens supplier, who will then ship the order directly to the customer. This saves data entry steps for your staff and therefore time and money. This allows you another method of customizing your services to the patients needs, especially when they may decide to take their contact lens order, and your profit, to another internet provider. According to the September 2000 issue of connected, optometrists have "...a growing need for effective practice management tools and the acute need to find creative ways to retain not only patients but also their highly profitable eye care prescriptions." Providing a practice web site is one method of doing this.

In 1999, the non-profit Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) launched a three-year study to determine elements that make up an idealized design for a clinical office practice. Accessibility is one factor they determined was critical. According to the panel, "Patients in an ideal practice would say: 'I can gain access to the practice to obtain an appointment, information, or other service in the form that I choose on the day that I ask for it, or at any other time of my choice.'"

In addition to the IHI study supporting the use of a web site for better accessibility, recent surveys indicate that healthcare is the fourth most popular topic on the Internet. This number increases with women and seniors, for whom these sites are the second most popular destination. Middle-aged women are also usually responsible for the health care decisions for their family, so making sure your practice is accessible on the web is a prudent move.

In the February 2001 issue of Review of Optometry, the results of a survey were published. Nationally 150 doctors of optometry responded to the survey, which asked about their attitudes towards practice-based web sites.

Of the doctors surveyed, 47% had a web site for their practice. Patient education was the main focus for 82% of those. Only 4% had product-selling capabilities, the most directly profitable aspect of a web site. Directions to the office were the most common feature of the web sites, with 79% offering them. Promotional information was given by 60%, while 54% listed information on their products.

One survey respondent said his net increased \$12,000 directly from his web site -- a return of 2,000%! While not all web sites will generate this kind of result, it is an avenue of marketing and profit-building that should not be overlooked.

Your practice web site won't generate revenue if no one sees it. List your website address on all your correspondence -- business cards, letterhead, brochures, yellow pages ads, telephone on-hold messages, etc. You can also opt, usually for a fee, to have it linked to certain search engines. (See Appendix A) This will allow your practice to be listed as a general eye care provider or for specialty services in your geographic area.

Appointments

Make it easy for a patient to schedule and keep an appointment. This may mean stressing pre-appointments, extending or changing your business hours, or providing the option for patients to make their own appointments on-line at your web site. Allowing patients to schedule their own appointments on a web site means they can schedule their appointments at their convenience, which may be after your regular office hours. The patient

is asked a few questions, just as your receptionist would, and given options for available exam times. The option to use on-line scheduling is provided by many of the same companies that will host your web site for you. (See Appendix A)

Surveys

A survey of your patients can lead to some helpful information on how to grow or market your practice. Ask a new patient how they heard about you or a returning patient what keeps them coming back. Other questions may include ranking what they feel are the most important factors in choosing a health care provider. Is it location? Insurance plans accepted? Parking availability? This information can be useful in future marketing campaigns and may also help you if you are considering doing some remodeling or relocating and want to retain your current patients. You may choose to design a survey yourself or enlist an optometric consultant who can design and conduct the study, then help interpret the results.

Using your web site to conduct market research or survey patients offers one possibility. Dr. Gary L. Moss, in the previously mentioned *AOA Journal* article, states that the two components of traditional market research with the highest cost are data collection and analysis. By doing a survey via the web, interviewers and any associated bias are eliminated. The cost of data collection is zero and software programs can be purchased that can tabulate and analyze your results. While conducting a survey in this manner provides current patient feedback at a low cost, keep in mind that it will only reach a limited segment of your patient base.

A Vision Care Plan

In today's health care market place, where a patient receives eye care is often dictated by their managed care plan. Low reimbursements or rigidly packaged services discourage optometrists from accepting many plans. One alternative is to set up your own care plan. This can be marketed to local employers or to specific groups such as a sports team. N. Rex Ghormley, an O.D. in St. Louis, specializes in sports vision. To attract new patients, he set up a formal Office Vision Care Plan with the sports teams he is involved with. Team members, family members, and employees of the arena receive a courtesy on professional services, eyewear, and contact lenses at no cost to the employer. Dr. Ghormley also encourages offering the vision plan to smaller groups. The development of a vision plan can be fairly straightforward and sources such as the American Optometric Association can provide helpful references.

Newspaper articles

Your local newspaper is an excellent source of publicity. An excellent way to get regular coverage is to offer to write a monthly column on eye care topics. Begin by contacting the appropriate editor and explain your professional attributes. It is helpful to have a tentative list of monthly topics to propose in addition to the first 2-3 columns. For column topics and information, consider reputable sources on the internet such as the American Optometric Association. If the editor doesn't already offer, suggest that your photo runs with the column. This generates more recognition than your name alone. Once the editor has agreed to your column, make sure you always keep your deadlines.

Once you have established a contact at the newspaper and shown your dependability, it will be easier to have other articles published. If you know in advance that you will be involved in a community event alert your editor that you will provide an article and photos. Also, let them know about a new staff member or associate, a new service, a screening you are organizing, or a human-interest story a member of your staff or patients with a news release. This can be an excellent way to generate public relations with no monetary cost to you.

Special events

There are numerous opportunities to sponsor or participate in a special event that is related to vision. You may wish to tie this in to national promotion such as Save Your Vision Month. (For notes on how the Michigan College of Optometry celebrated Save Your Vision Week 1999 and a list of teacher activities see Appendix C.) Sponsors often have suggestions for promoting their event. When doing so, don't hesitate to notify the local newspaper. They have pages to fill and if you submit a story and photo that emphasized a community event, they will often publish it. It is important to not take a self-promotional approach when writing an article for submission, but to emphasize the community's involvement in a special event. Good quality photos featuring children are often printed. Include all the names of the people in the photo and get their permission before taking or using the photo. Cable TV and radio stations will also air free Public Service Announcements (PSA's) if they support a community event or are educational.

A special event might be a screening at a local Boys/Girls Club or a diabetic screening for an at-risk or underserved population. Screenings receive positive attention from

the media as well as from potential patients. Other public services could be volunteering to staff a booth at a local career fair. If you want to increase your pediatric population, sponsor an art contest. Come up with a theme and prizes and notify the local schools. Display the winning entries in your reception area with photos of the winning contestants. You may wish to involve another sponsor, such as an art supply store.

The strategic plan for marketing and public relations of the Healthcare Division of the American Society for Quality (ASQ) states they will, “Assess the changing needs in the health care environment, identify new opportunities, and promote the skills and services of the membership.” This statement could also be applied to your own practice and used as motivation to undertake a special event. Consider what the skills and services of your practice are and think of new ways they can be used in the community.

Speaking engagements are an excellent way to promote optometry and educate the public. If you are comfortable in a speaker’s position, volunteer to be part of the speakers bureau of your local or state optometric association.

Financial Considerations

Any public relations or marketing plan should be calculated into the budget. While a few marketing tools, such as a column or article in the local newspaper, may be free of cost, most will require some financial outlay. Ideally, you should include marketing in your overall business plan for your practice. Do your homework first, and find out who your competitors are and how you can create, or maintain, your niche. As part of your marketing plan, set goals that are specific and then outline how you will achieve them. Judith Lee,

Senior Contributing Editor to Review of Optometry, suggests focusing on the following areas under the marketing section of your business plan:

- *Your patients* – use a demographic profile of your patients to show trends. Do a patient satisfaction survey.
- *Competing providers* – Know where local eye care providers are located, what services they provide, their general fees, and their strengths and weaknesses.
- *Advertising* – Designate funds for advertising, including newspaper and Yellow Pages ads, brochures, newsletters, etc. Specific whose responsibility it is to create and maintain these.
- *Fee Schedule* – Outline the basis for determining your fees, and when in the past and future you are planning fee increases.
- *Location* – If you are considering relocating or remodeling, consider this area thoroughly. What are the reasons you want to relocate? What will the cost be? Is there room for expansion?
- *Industry Trends* – Keep up to date on changes in healthcare delivery and insurance plans and determine how you can change to meet these demands.

One difficult question may be how much to budget for marketing. You can start by considering methods you have tried in the past, keeping in mind the audience you are targeting. Talk to colleagues who have tried other methods and get their feedback. Do some research and analyze what methods of advertising might be most appropriate for your practice. When considering the cost of a particular venture, calculate how many patients it would take to pay it off and see if that seems like a reasonable number. Some methods of

tracking the results of an advertisement may include offering a coupon in the newspaper or on-line that the patient turns into you to redeem.

A few years ago, Sears Optical used a public relations firm to promote National Eye Exam Month, a nationwide sales event to attract patients to optical departments, increase sales, and raise money for Prevent Blindness America. In order to take a fresh approach, a free, one-day national vision screening was arranged to kick-off the event. As part of the marketing associated with this event, a national consumer magazine media tour generated announcements in 11 magazines, including Good Housekeeping, Woman's Day, and Family Circle. A video news release aired on more than 100 TV stations and local newspapers announced the event. While the expenses were high for such a large promotion, it resulted in company records and Sears Optical's best year ever. Consider the potential return on your investment. Scaling a national promotion like this down to a local scale may be able to provide equal rewards for a small practice.

In conclusion, there are many opportunities to market and promote your practice. Consider the needs of your practice and what approach will be most beneficial. Taking the time to plan and execute a successful marketing strategy is crucial to maintaining a profitable practice.

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