

Build Your Dermatology Practice with Referral Marketing

If you are not making a deliberate effort to manage your referral network, you could be inviting problems and overlooking opportunities.

BY NAREN ARULRAJAH

A strong referral network is the lifeblood of many medical specialties. However, it is something that many dermatologists take for granted. With a growing number of dermatology practices, other physicians have more options than ever when referring a patient. If you are not making a deliberate effort to grow and manage your referral network, you could be inviting problems and overlooking opportunities.

The first step is making your dermatology practice referral-friendly. Create a strategic referral marketing plan, and implement it consistently. Don't expect overnight results. It takes time to develop quality professional relationships, but the benefits are well worth the effort.

Technology can be your greatest asset or biggest roadblock. To avoid errors and delays, choose a quality, highly functional software system, keep it updated, and make sure that your team is proficient in using it. Also discuss Electronic Health Records (EHR) sharing with new referral partners. In theory, EHR enables seamless information sharing and coordinated care. In reality, compatibility issues can complicate or even ruin a referral relationship.

BUILDING YOUR NETWORK

The core of referral marketing is building an extensive and diverse professional network. While you may be well known among fellow dermatologists, they are unlikely to be good referral sources unless your practice is highly specialized.

Naturally, you expect referrals from primary care providers, who encounter a skin problem beyond their expertise. However, they aren't your only profitable networking partners. Dermatologic issues affect every part of the body, which means that virtually any medical provider can be a good refer-

“You probably use networks such as Facebook and Instagram to connect with potential patients, but social media is also a good opportunity to establish professional connections.”

ral source. Patients may ask a podiatrist about toenail fungus or a foot rash or tell the dentist that they want lip augmentation to accompany their beautiful new teeth.

You need to reach out to medical providers in all fields, and possibly even beyond the medical community. Some of the best ways to establish new connections include:

Conferences, seminars, and other professional events. This can be a good way to make new contacts outside your specialty, even if you are just a guest. Even better, if you have the opportunity to present a topic, you will establish yourself as an expert in your specialty. You might give a speech about melanoma screening (which many primary providers are not trained in), or discuss the skin symptoms of medicine allergies.

Social media. You probably use networks such as Facebook and Instagram to connect with potential patients, but social media is also a good opportunity to establish professional connections. For this purpose, LinkedIn is the most important network; you should maintain a profile and

actively participate in applicable groups. Also, seek out local networks and specialized forums.

One-on-one interaction. Know what doctors practice near your office and make an effort to acquaint yourself. This is especially beneficial when a new practice opens in town, because they are unlikely to have an existing referral network. A simple “welcome to the neighborhood” note or phone call can open a potentially fruitful dialog.

Wherever you find your referral partners, it is important to be selective about which ones you work with. Not every doctor is a good fit. Your philosophies, standard of care, and approach to medicine should be in alignment. Otherwise, you are likely to have unhappy patients and problematic professional relationships.

Some doctors embrace natural and alternative medicine, while others consider it ineffective or even harmful. Some practices cater to elite, adult clientele with a quiet, luxurious, and ultra-private setting. Others welcome children, and strive to keep a jovial, family-like atmosphere in the office.

These are just a few examples of many potential conflicts in style of practice. Long-time patients are accustomed to a certain level and type of service. When they are referred to a specialist, they expect a similar experience. If your practice does not meet those expectations, referred patients are more likely to give you poor reviews, and they are less likely to become regular customers.

MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

A referral network is not maintenance-free. All too often, these important professional connections are made—and

then forgotten. The doctor does not know how many patients have been referred by a given source, or how frequently. Avoid this by documenting and tracking referrals. Track the number of patients and type of cases, as well as any particular benefits or problems.

Over time, you will be able to identify your most important connections, as well as spot potential problems. You will also probably discover some connections that you have not heard from in months, or even longer. Reach out to them and actively nurture the relationship. If it becomes apparent that you will not be receiving more referrals from this source, remove them from your list.

Another common problem is inappropriate referrals, such as patients who do not need specialized care and those with problems that fall outside your expertise. According to a survey by Kyruus, these can comprise about one-quarter of all referrals. This happens most often when the source physician lacks information about the specialty.

Communication is the key to a strong and effective network. Initially, provide your referral partners with ample information about your areas of focus, credentialed subspecialties, and particular areas of expertise. For example, is your practice aesthetic, medical, or both? Do you treat children? Do you offer surgical procedures? If you are receiving inappropriate referrals from a particular source, reiterate the information about your specialty.

Don't wait until there is a problem before you make contact with a referring physician. In fact, regular communication is most important with your best referral sources, because you want to keep those relationships strong. Touch base regularly, and keep them updated about mutual patients.

Be sure to let patients know that you are in communication with their other doctor or doctors. Coordinated medical care is a high priority for many people, who often feel like they are “falling through the cracks” in today's complex medical system. The long-term benefits of referral marketing, or any type of marketing, ultimately hinge on patient satisfaction. No matter how people find your practice, delivering a quality patient experience is key to keeping them coming back. ■

Naren Arulrajah is President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, a complete internet marketing company that focuses on SEO, social media, marketing education, and the online reputations of dermatologists. With a team of 180+ full time marketers, www.ekwa.com helps dermatologists who know where they want to go, get there by dominating their market and growing their business significantly year after year. If you have questions about marketing your practice online, call 855-598-3320 to speak one-on-one with Naren.



GET MORE



Learn what you need to know about dermatology SEO in 2018.

Watch now: DermTube.com/video/newyearseo/



From the publishers of Practical Dermatology