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Can Good PR Build A Medical Practice?

BY JOHN CARROLL

Kathy Rothman never went to medical school or fulfilled a demanding residency. But she nevertheless operates in a medical specialty that requires a deft touch and an in-depth knowledge of healthcare.

Rothman crafts physicians' public reputations. And when she's done, they may never be able to walk into a five-star restaurant unrecognized again.

"Very often, it's not the doctor with the best training or most skill that becomes a star," says Rothman, "but the doctor with the best PR machine."

Just ask any woman in New York City who the best plastic surgeons, says

Rothman, and chances are they'll reel off the same six names. Six names that appear with great frequency in *Vogue*, *W* or on "Good Morning America." Six plastic surgeons that decide name recognition was a valuable commodity worth a professional's care.

Rothman didn't exactly plan it this way. Her PR career was temporarily cancelled along with the talk shows she used to promote in New York. Necessity led her to another firm that handled several doctors around town, and she set off to create her own firm — KMR — two years ago.

KMR works with individual physicians, medical groups and associations. Many are plastic surgeons, or dermatolo-

gists, cosmetic dentists, chiropractors or optometrists — a range of specialty practices that typically aren't covered under the standard issue health care insurance plan. "Now we're seeing those in holistic medicine stepping up," says Rothman.

But medical PR isn't just for physicians in major cities, she says. One of Rothman's clients is the Georgia Chiropractic Association. On many occasions, her account executives stir media interest in chiropractic medicine and then find members of the association to act as a spokesperson — helping highlight their practices as well as the services chiropractors offer.

Others in these fields may be able

to turn some pro bono work helping a child or family for free into a human-interest story for a local newspaper or television station.

"I think one of the biggest misconceptions is that PR can't work if they're not in the big city," says Rothman. "Another is that they often think they have to develop a groundbreaking procedure or do something unique to get press coverage. It's really all in the talent of the PR group, putting a new spin to an old topic."

You also don't have to live in the big city to get some big city attention, says Rothman. A good PR practitioner can tap in on a morning news show's interest in drawing on sources from coast-to-coast.

There are some other myths Rothman likes to take on.

"Some of the doctors think, 'I've never had formal media training, I've never been on television, how can this work for me?' Doctors are not expected to have the same charm as a movie star. Patients want to see that a doctor is knowledgeable and approachable and articulate."

Media contacts want to know that they're immediately available.

"The media runs on tight deadlines and very often the PR firm is at the mercy of the media," she says. "The physicians that respond fastest and give good sound bites, those are the physicians that realize the greatest success."

Immediate results are another matter. In some cases, says Rothman, there are some golden media opportunities that can make a doctor into a household name overnight. But in most cases you can expect to take a considerable amount of time to build a public reputation.

"PR is highly cumulative," says Rothman. "They really need to give it some time."