

Insight from the Other Side



Plastic Surgery Products contacted four public relations and marketing specialists with more than 50 years combined experience working with cosmetic plastic surgeons. They included Katherine M. Rothman, CEO of KMR Communications Inc; Greg Washington, president of Patients Unlimited Marketing Consultants; Dana Fox, vice president of Inform Solutions; and Angela O'Mara, president of the Professional Image. We asked them what their experience has taught them about working with plastic surgeons and what strategies they recommend using to attract more business for their clients.

What is the most effective way for a plastic surgeon to increase his or her clientele?

Fox: Building a cosmetic practice is like building any other luxury product or service business. It requires outstanding phone skills at a patient's first contact with your practice and a sophisticated follow-up system. Offer superb customer service. Put your very best people on the phone to create an irresistible experience. Once the patient arrives at your office, treat her as if your success is dependent on her, because it is. If you already have excellent customer service and the problem is not enough incoming phone calls, marketing and advertising may be a solution. Start by researching your competition, then research why your happy patients chose you in the first place. Develop a unique selling proposition (USP) based on the research. Let someone unrelated to the practice shop the competition and your patients; the feedback tends to be less biased and more reliable from a marketing standpoint. Once a USP has been determined, ensure that all your marketing messages—print, radio, and Internet—use the same message to establish a brand that people will remember and take action on.

Washington: Over the past 25 years we have found that internally driven and integrated promotions are efficient, effective, and give the best return on investment. Internal promotion does require precise planning and careful administration. We recommend enhancing the practice's relationships with patients-of-record. Developing an ongoing patient communication program is essential. For example, use an enticing announcement of new service offerings, for example, dermal fillers, with a downloadable coupon. Reinforce this promotion with direct e-mailings. Note that patient privacy (HIPAA) communications issues need to be considered.

O'Mara: We have used a combination of marketing tools, including advertising, direct

promotion, and media placement to increase patient awareness. Each practice and physician is unique, therefore we audit every facet of the practice and develop a set of strategic recommendations. In today's climate, appearances on TV and articles in magazines are the most credible way to promote a practice.

What options does a PR agency give doctors that they cannot do on their own?

Washington: An outside agency provides the doctor with specialized skills and knowledge of media protocols that most practices do not know of. Doctors are too busy to attend to the level of detail and follow-up that is required for an effective PR program. The biggest advantage that an outside agency brings is a "third voice." It is difficult to believe a surgeon who is telling you how great he or she is, but the third voice can speak words that catch the ear of the media decision-maker.

In terms of behavior and attitude, what kind of plastic surgeon is best to work with? What kind of personality benefits most from an association with a PR agency?

Rothman: The best kind of surgeon to work with is proactive with his or her PR firm. They respond to media queries in a timely fashion, share interesting news from the practice, and give the media "good sound bites." It is also critical to the success of a campaign that a surgeon has before-and-after pictures for the media, a Web site, and patients willing to appear on camera or speak to the media.

Washington: The best client is one that already has the skills to do the work and is willing to follow a precise marketing plan. He or she would also possess the ability to finance the promotional programs, have the needed equipment, supplies, space, and staff. The ideal client also strongly believes that the staff is an important piece of the marketing equation.

O'Mara: As far as personality, many plastic surgeons are used to giving lectures. This will hold them in good stead to give media appearances. What needs to be learned, as far as speech, presentation, and manner of dress can always be taught.

What are the toughest challenges to overcome in working with a plastic surgeon?

Washington: There are many challenges. Most are specific to the client's needs, expectations, and timing. One of the most common challenges is a client's limited Web site that cannot support the needs of marketing a practice in combination with the pro-

motional programs. The final two challenges are an unwilling-

ness to prepare a detailed marketing plan and a limited budget to conduct the promotion.

O'Mara: Most of our clients are aware of new techniques and technologies. However, some plastic surgeons may not have done anything to update their approach to aesthetics or the technology they use. This makes it more challenging for a PR person. The other tough challenge, is the insatiable appetite of the media as it relates to aesthetic surgery. We are now seeing many unqualified doctors quoted in the news, and more doctors are choosing PR over other forms of promotion. Basically, this is making the playing field that much more uneven.

When and why would you advise a potential client not to use a PR agency?

Rothman: I would advise a potential client not to use a PR firm if their business is in bad shape financially, if they are going through a transition of personnel, or are in the midst of a life crisis, such as a divorce. The best candidate has a thriving practice, is well thought of among patients and peers, and is simply seeking a competitive edge that advertising and marketing often cannot deliver alone.

Washington: We really cannot think of too many situations where we have advised a potential client not to use some level of outside assistance. There are instances, however, where the client will ask for assistance and have a limited budget or a short horizon of expectation for results. In these situations, we realize that we can best help the client by clarifying their goals, and managing the client's expectations before initiating work. One of the tools we now use to aid a client in determining their goal before starting promotion is to have them review the "Seven Indices of Successful Marketing" (available at <http://pumc.com/article.htm>). ■

Make contact:

Katherine M. Rothman, CEO of KMR Communications Inc, can be reached at (212) 213-6444; info@kmrcommunications.com; www.kmrcommunications.com.

Greg Washington, president, Patients Unlimited Marketing Consultants, can be reached at (323) 756-8371; pumcgw@pumc.com; www.pumc.com.

Dana Fox, vice president of Inform Solutions, can be reached at (800) 800-8314; dana@informsolutions.com; www.informsolutions.com.

Angela O'Mara, president of the Professional Image, can be reached at (949) 760-1522; angela@theprofessionalimage.com; www.theprofessionalimage.com.