



# What Is Public Relations?

By Katherine Rothman

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Public relations (PR) is the practice of managing the flow of information between an organization and its publics. Public relations - often referred to as PR - gains an organization or individual exposure to their audiences using topics of public interest and news items that do not require direct payment. Because public relations places exposure in credible third-party outlets, it offers a third-party legitimacy that advertising does not have.

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Common activities include speaking at conferences, working with the press, and employee communication. PR can be used to build rapport with employees, customers, investors, voters, or the general public. Almost any organization that has a stake in how it is portrayed in the public arena

employs some level of public relations.

## What does this definition actually mean to those in the aesthetic industry?

If one is a plastic surgeon, a skin care company CEO, a salon owner, or dermatologist, how is public relations relevant, why is it necessary, and what is the goal of engaging in some form of public relations?

People often understandably but mistakenly confuse public relations with advertising or marketing, and they do not grasp the nuances of each form of promotion. Advertising is the least complex and the most straightforward. It entails figuring out what one's message is, designing an ad, and choosing media outlets in which to advertise.

Advertising is extremely expensive for all but very large organizations; and it lacks credibility because it is the individual or company making statements or claims about one's own medical skill, customer/patient care, and results. The bottom line is: "Why should the public believe or trust the

message?” When it comes to aesthetic medicine, most educated consumers place very little credibility in an ad. A doctor using advertising to promote a practice is not accepted as readily as a restaurant or hotel using this approach. Then we come to marketing which can have many meanings and is a term used much too broadly and usually in the wrong context.

### Wikipedia Defines ‘Marketing’

Marketing is defined by the American Marketing Association as the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.

The term developed from the original meaning which referred literally to going to market, as in shopping, or going to a market to sell goods or services. Marketing practice tends to be seen as a creative industry, which includes advertising, distribution, and selling.

It is also concerned with anticipating the customers' future needs and wants which are often discovered through market research. Seen from a systems point of view, sales process engineering views marketing as a set of processes that are interconnected and interdependent with other functions, whose methods can be improved using a variety of relatively new approaches.

For most small businesses, whether they are medical practices, skin care companies, or spas, marketing tends to end up being a “catch as catch can” means of promotion that is time consuming and expensive. For example, a doctor’s office might purchase a zip code list in order to send prospective patients brochures. 95% of the time, this is just tossed out with the “junk mail.” Office managers might schedule seminars for their doctors to speak to a prospective group of patients.

What this does is take the doctor out of the office where

he/she could be making money actually performing surgery and is instead speaking to a group of people simply seeking free information.



Ideally, if a business or medical practitioner had unlimited funds, which is extremely rare today, it might be prudent to engage in marketing, public relations, and advertising in the hope that each would complement the other. It is the rare case where these types of funds are available.

Public relations, when implemented by true public relations professionals, is the most cost effective and credible way to stand out from the competition.

As Will Rogers once said, "All I know is what I read in the papers." Surprisingly, patients choose their physicians the same way in which they might purchase a car. Ask someone, “Who makes the best car?” You might hear, Mercedes. Then ask, “Do you own one, have you ever driven one?” NO. “Then how do you know they make the best cars?” “All I know is what the media says.” Most people determine what is best by finding out what other people think. The two major sources for drawing this conclusion are the media and word of mouth. This car analogy holds true for the way in which people choose an elective surgeon. Success and publicity go hand in hand today. It is a rare case to find one without the other.



## SUB-SPECIALTIES & PR

In hair restoration, dermatology, plastic surgery, ophthalmology, and now even dentistry there are physicians whose names have become synonymous with a particular sub-specialty. Have these doctors re-invented the wheel or discovered the fountain of youth to warrant such acclaim? The answer is usually no. Most have simply hired a skilled PR firm with solid media connections.

Many doctors who would like to explore the prospect of engaging a PR firm feel that if they are not located in big cities such as Los Angeles, Miami, New York, or Chicago, that PR efforts will prove fruitless. Actually, the opposite is true. Those in the media want to have a cross-section of cities from which to draw experts. In the same vein, some suburban doctors feel that prospective patients are intent on consulting only with urban doctors.



While media resulting from public relations will probably not lure a city resident to the suburbs, it can keep the suburban doctor's patient population in his or her own backyard, which is the biggest battle faced by suburban physicians. Media exposure can serve to assure patients of receiving the same standard of care (outside of a city) while making them feel as if a "medical star" is in their own hometown.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS VERSUS ADVERTISING

Public relations differs from advertising in that it uses editorial coverage in newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and health internet sites to highlight a physician and his or her practice. A campaign can focus on new trends, techniques, controversies, safety issues in a respective sub-specialty or any host of topics deemed press worthy by a publicist and media representative. Essentially, a PR campaign works by taking information the consumer needs and wants to know and presenting it in the form of actual stories related to your sub-specialty.

Ensuing media exposure in outlets such as Men's Fitness, Vogue magazine or programs like The Today Show have a huge impact on prospective patients' medical choices. It serves to reinforce that a physician is the expert in his or her field. In addition, it lends a cache and seal of approval that cannot be achieved even by an aggressive ad campaign.



Today advertising for medical services is a huge business. Advertising for hospitals alone in 2000 was estimated at somewhere between \$167 million and \$1.3 billion. Moreover, the only current regulation of medical advertising effectively says you cannot lie or intentionally deceive; and, even so, enforcement seems extremely casual. Advertising does not build images, publicity does.

## THIRD PARTY ENDORSEMENT

Advertising can only maintain individuals or companies that have been created by publicity. The truth is, advertising cannot start a fire. It can only fan the flames after they have been ignited. To launch someone or something from nothing, you need the validity that only third party endorsement can bring. No matter how creative the advertising, no matter how appropriate the medium, there is just no way around the issue of credibility. There is a better alternative. Public relations

tell your story indirectly through third party outlets, primarily the media. Yes, there are disadvantages to PR. You cannot control the content, the timing, or the visual appearance of your message.

PR compensates for its disadvantages because it has credibility, and advertising does not. Potential patients are cynical, suspicious, and cautious. As the volume of web and print based medical advertising increases, they

advertising. To the average person the editorial stories are the last bastions of objectivity in a sea of prejudice.

**PRACTICE PROMOTION**

As the stakes in elective medicine were raised, even the most conservative physicians knew they had to change with the times or risk an empty waiting room. Advertising was the first phase in the evolution of practice promotion. Soon, savvy

Those physicians who sought an upper income man or woman began to feel that advertising did not impact their target patient. The reality is that those with disposable income for elective procedures typically find their physicians through referrals or editorial coverage, not advertising. Enter public relations. By mastering the patterns of media impact and the rudiments of public relations, physicians and others in the aesthetic industry can make media coverage the element that catapults a business or medical practice independent of the economic climate. **TR**

**Credits:** “The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR” by Al Ries (Author), Laura Ries (Author).



About The Author

**Katherine M. Rothman** is the CEO of KMR Communications, Inc., a New York based PR firm with clients worldwide. The firm specializes in representing those in the medical and beauty fields with a core focus on media coverage. The firm has been in business for 12 years and was voted by PR Week “as one of the top 50 healthcare PR firms in the nation.” Visit the KMR website: [www.kmrpr.com](http://www.kmrpr.com), or email Ms. Rothman at: [info@kmrpr.com](mailto:info@kmrpr.com).

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are turning to independent third party sources for physician referrals. Seldom do they check the ads. A typical newspaper is 30% editorial and 70%

practitioners realized that advertising might only serve to maintain the status quo of a practice without taking it to the next level.

