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The doctor is in the media

By Henry DeVries

When it comes to wooing and winning patients for discretionary medical procedures, many doctors are finding it pays to be an expert quoted by the media.

Twenty years ago, the concept of medical marketing was unthinkable. Both the American Medical Association and the American Dental Association strictly forbade advertising and promotional activities. In 1975, after the Supreme Court ruled that antitrust law prohibited the American Bar Association from regulating how lawyers run their businesses, both the AMA and the ADA changed their stance, fearing lawsuits from physicians.

To gain trust with potential patients, many plastic surgeons have been implementing public relations in their practices for over half a decade. In fact, they were among the first medical specialists to use this method of practice promotion. Now, dermatologists, chiropractors, dentists, ophthalmologists and others have followed suit.

"The editorial coverage that results from a successful public relations campaign can serve to make a plastic surgeon a star in his or her target area," says Katherine Rothman, CEO of the Manhattan-based **KMR**

Communications Inc. "Although good training, surgical results and patient care is of paramount importance, in today's media-driven society, women especially place tremendous credibility in what the media dictates as chic, fashionable or of quality."

Rothman points out that 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. Selected as "one of the top 50 health care PR firms in the nation" by *PR Week Magazine*, Rothman's firm has successfully represented dozens of plastic surgeons nationwide. Her clients regularly appear in prestigious magazines, newspapers, television and radio programs.

A public relations campaign can focus on new trends, techniques, controversies, safety issues in a respective subspecialty 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 plastic surgery.

According to Rothman, the plastic surgeons who have created a name for themselves have not typically revolutionized cosmetic surgery, but more likely they have employed a publicist to create cleverly spun consumer-oriented press releases which result in mentions in publications such as *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Allure*, *In Style* and others of similar prestige.

"While medical advertising can sometimes translate as biased, it never occurs to the average person that a doctor employed a public relations firm to secure a media spot," says Rothman. "Not only can public relations and subsequent media exposure increase name recognition, it can also translate into actual patients and assure current patients that they made the right choice."

Ensuing media exposure in outlets such as *Elle* or *Vogue* magazine or programs like "The Today Show" has a huge impact on prospective patients' medical choices. Rothman says it serves to reinforce that a physician is the expert in his or her subspecialty. In addition, it lends a cache and seal of approval that cannot always be achieved even by an aggressive ad campaign.

"But some health professionals still have a tendency to view marketing as hawking -- much like a barker at a carnival or a crass used car salesman trying to lure unsuspecting victims," says Anthony Mora, author of the book "Spin to Win" and president of his own Los Angeles public relations firm. "It's the thought of the coarse, smoke-and-mirror, hit-them-over-the-head style of publicity that understandably terrifies many in the medical field."

But just as the image of a physician giving a patient a stiff drink and a bullet to bite before performing surgery is archaic, says Mora, those public relations stereotypes have nothing to do with the reality of an intelligent, effective media campaign that educates and informs the media and the public. Used effectively, public relations can usher in new concepts and perspectives, and shape the ideas of a community and a nation.

"To reach that end, physicians need to view themselves as educators," adds Mora. "After all, we live in the information age and no profession, field or practice can avoid its effects. Professionals who understand the process and actively take control of the information are the ones who will succeed."

Today, savvy hospitals and physicians view public relations as an integral component of their business strategy. They are learning that they must change their perceptions to remain competitive.

Yet few have really come to terms with the process. Mora believes it's not enough to simply hire a professional

and continue as before; a change in attitude and outlook is required.

For example, when it comes to communicating, doctors are used to present scientific data to their peers. They are trained to think in terms of studies and statistics, whereas the public and media both understand and respond more favorably to anecdotal stories.

Of course, this does not apply only to those in the health care field, adds Mora. Many professionals can speak the jargon of their particular field, but this makes for a very insular form of communication. He advises that all business professionals can benefit from learning to speak the public's language and honing their ability to communicate.

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