

Plastic Surgery Issue

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PracticeBuilding today

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Premier Issue

Winning WAYS

BRANDING
YOUR PRACTICE

SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC
RELATIONS TIPS

PRACTICE
MANAGEMENT
SOFTWARE

By Katherine M. Rothman



Grabbing the Limelight

Successful plastic surgeons have been implementing public relations programs to build their practices for more than half a decade. They are probably the ones

you have heard of. In fact, plastic surgeons were among the first specialists to use this method of practice development.

Today, the concept of engaging a public relations firm is not just the prerogative of large plastic surgery practices in big cities such as Miami, Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago, but as specialists like dermatologists, ENTs, ophthalmologists, and others follow suit, it has become a nationwide trend.

While the country was already in an economic downturn before September 11, the terrorist attacks pushed the country toward a full-fledged recession. Consequently, those plastic surgeons, who depend largely on cosmetic surgery patients spending discretionary income, find themselves with cancelled procedures and empty waiting rooms. The exception to this may be a small percentage of practitioners who have implemented public relations over a period of time and reaped its cumulative effects. Seemingly recession-resistant practices are able to tap into a demographic that always seems to have disposable income independent of the economy

WHY PUBLIC RELATIONS?

Advertising, Internet marketing, and practice management teams are all important tools in helping a practice flourish. Public relations adds an all-important level of credibility through the implied third-party endorsement that editorial coverage brings to the marketing mix. A successful public relations campaign also can help a plastic surgeon stand out in a crowded market, ie, be perceived as

a star in his or her target area.

While good training, surgical results, and patient care are of paramount importance, in today's media-driven society, men and especially women place tremendous confidence in what the media dictates as chic, fashionable, and top quality. The result is that plastic surgeons who have created a name for themselves stand out in the crowd and attract these clients.

These successful surgeons may or may not have revolutionized cosmetic surgery, but many have used a publicist who knew how to create cleverly spun, consumer-oriented news stories about them and had the contacts and know-how to get those stories placed in prestigious lifestyle publications nationally, regionally, and at the grass roots.

Public relations differs from advertising in that it uses editorial coverage in newspapers and magazines and on radio, television, and Internet sites to highlight a physician and his or her practice. A campaign can focus on new trends, techniques, controversies, safety issues, or any host of topics deemed pressworthy by a publicist and media representative. Essentially, a public relations campaign works by providing information the consumer needs and wants to know in a form that showcases the expertise of the physician/client.

Resultant exposure, whether in national media outlets, such as "The Today Show," or in local city magazines, such as *LA Magazine* or *Philly Magazine*, has a huge impact on prospective patients' medical choices.

Good editorial coverage in the right places positions a physician as the expert in his or her spe-

cialty and/or subspecialty. In addition, it lends a cache and a "seal of approval" beyond what can be achieved by even an aggressive advertising campaign. The bottomline is that not only can effective public relations and resultant media exposure increase positive name recognition, it can also translate into new patients, increased revenue, and reassured current patients.

IS PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR YOU?

Plastic surgeons typically have two major concerns about embarking on a public relations program. First, many feel that they are not candidates for public relations if they do not have something new or exciting to provide to the media, and second, they mistakenly believe that they need to be in a major media market to be in the game.

The reality is that while most plastic surgeons are performing similar procedures, some positioned themselves in the lead by coining their own name for it, creating the impression of inno-

vation. A skilled publicist should be adept at spinning variations on plastic surgery topics while still being mindful of ethics and what is in the interest of good patient care. Seasoned public relations professionals know how to weave a story to make it exciting for the media and how to tie it in with a trend, season, holiday, controversy, celebrity, or national news story.

A plastic surgeon need not be in an urban hub to avail themselves of public relations, either. In fact, it is often easier for plastic surgeons outside of the top markets to quickly reap the benefits of media coverage because it is less likely that their peers have discovered the benefits of this mode of practice promotion. Although suburban physicians will not necessarily lure patients from nearby cities, media coverage can indeed circumvent the mindset that top echelon surgeons are only found in major markets.

Because most cosmetic surgery patients are paying out of their own pockets and are choosing to undergo a procedure, the personality of the cosmetic surgeon is a major factor in

What To Look for in a Public Relations Firm or Consultant:

- Ask for examples of successful campaign tactics.
- Request examples of print and media coverage for other medical clients.
 - Assess their knowledge of plastic surgery procedures and terminology.
 - Get a reasonable estimate of frequency of media coverage. PR professionals should be able to give an estimate such as one media placement per month, four per month etc, based on previous experience.
 - Know the markets that will be pursued and make sure they are practice appropriate. If a doctor is in California, the PR firm should not be pursuing coverage in Idaho. Ascertain if the coverage will be both local and with the national media. Some doctors are only interested in the top tier national coverage, while others might be satisfied with local exposure.
 - Ask for samples of press releases written for other clients.
 - If you are hiring a firm, know the account executive to client ratio and how much time will be devoted to your account within a given week or month.
 - Ask if there are any additional expenses such as monthly disbursements. For example, does the PR firm charge

clients for faxes, phone calls, messengers, and postage?

- Ask if the public relations firm provides clients with weekly written progress reports—the good ones do.
- Request a written proposal that will outline a campaign strategy and explain company policy.
- Get references.

TIPS TO GET STARTED ON YOUR OWN

- Compile good media contact lists. Lists of health and beauty editors and producers can be purchased through services, such as Bacon's Information Inc (<http://bacons.com>) or Burrelle's Information Services (<http://burrelles.com>).
- Email the local media your CV highlights and the link to your Web site. Explain why you would be a good source for interviews. Cite any new or innovative techniques you are implementing.
- Keep all press clippings and, with the written permission of the publisher, add them to a "see us in the media" section on your Web site. Frame these clippings and hang them in your waiting room. This has a positive impact on prospective patients.
- If you do volunteer work, let the media know. These stories make good

human interest pieces.

- If you would like media training to prepare for press coverage, call the Public Relations Society of America, New York City, (212) 995-2230; or visit their Web site at <http://www.prsa.org> to look for local experts. Sometimes even a few hours of training go a long way toward a polished image.
- Pay attention to what the media is doing and to the latest trends. Then offer the media commentary on these topics. Stories that tie in to holidays, trends, or seasons are more likely to gain attention than those that are of a general nature.
- Always have a press kit ready for the media that includes CV, a head shot, press clippings, a photo of your office, and a selection of before-and-after photos.
- Web sites are vital and need not be expensive. Find a good Web designer by looking at other medical Web sites and then contacting the Webmasters of those you find appealing.
- When responding to media queries do not have your own agenda. Editors and producers operate on tight deadlines and are seeking good, concise answers to their specific questions. Do not be professorial with answers. Instead, tailor your comments to the consumer. 0

MARKETING

selecting a practitioner. Physicians who appear in the media have an opportunity to convey to a large audience that they are knowledgeable, trustworthy, and approachable. Practitioners need not be exceptionally gifted speakers or undergo extensive media training to do this. The media responds best to physicians who make themselves accessible, give good "sound bites," and respond appropriately to questions without appearing to have a self-serving agenda. A good public relations firm or independent consultant can help a client navigate the dos and don'ts of media interaction.

TIME AND ATTENTION

An ongoing dialogue between the surgeon and the public relations professional is important. Those surgeons who apprise their publicists of new developments or techniques in the field and are willing to respond promptly to the media are those who tend to realize the greatest success. Those who decide to make the leap into public relations must be prepared to be proactive and flexible with their public relations professional. Media opportunities often arise with short notice and any public relations firm is essentially at the mercy of the media.

Ideally, a practice should be functioning like the proverbial well-oiled machine before committing to a public relations program. A capable office manager is also essential as a point person for the public relations professional. He/she can often help the publicist gather material such as patient photos and statistics, or assist in planning media shoots in accordance with a physician's schedule. But this should not preclude an ambitious young physician from going this route. In fact, having media coverage under one's belt early on will quell any doubt that patients might have about a less experienced plastic surgeon. Favorable articles can be reprinted and used for marketing. In the public's mind, positive media coverage lends a kind of "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" to the practitioner.

AVOID THE DO-IT-YOURSELF ROUTE?

Many plastic and cosmetic surgeons wonder why they cannot simply write their own press releases or have their office manager function in a dual capacity as their public relations professional. At best, it takes valuable time away from practicing medicine. At worst, handled unprofessionally many well-intentioned efforts can fall flat or even backfire.

Physicians who have gone it alone have quickly learned that the consumer media is not interested in painstakingly technical depictions of techniques, as would be appropriate

for a medical journal. They are also uninterested in press releases that are blatantly promotional. Medical jargon must be translated and presented in a way that is interesting and comprehensible for lay people, since most consumer writers and producers are not medical experts, they are generalists. Developing connections with the media is a full-time job. Public relations professionals have the time to solidify those connections with the press and make sure that they are recognized as a key source for medical/health care stories.

SELECTING A PR FIRM

Just as medicine has subspecialties, there are various sectors of public relations. Public relations firms often have niches, such as entertainment, fashion, finance, or technology. Medical public relations is a very specialized area. It is vital that plastic surgeons employ a representative who has had extensive experience with physicians and is familiar with

medical terminology in general, the language of their specialty in particular, and understands any sensitivities they may have. If a physician needs to give a public relations executive a crash course in plastic surgery, it will not



Good public relations is not vanity.
It is vital to success.

prove to be a very fruitful campaign.

The public relations representative also needs to have solid contacts with the media that deal in health and beauty. A firm's media contacts in these areas play a major role in the success of a client, so it is smart to choose a firm that knows the media in your market. Diligent public relations professionals spend significant time meeting face-to-face with editors and producers and solidifying good working relationships. This is true whether the target media for a story is national, like "Good Morning America," "Oprah," *Glamour*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Cosmopolitan*, or is centered in other large, medium, and small metropolitan markets across the country.

Finally, surgeons outside of top markets need to remember that their local consumers also watch national programming. For those who want to take the leap to prime time, national media coverage does indeed have positive ramifications at the local level, and most important, can help ensure a vigorous, growing practice no matter what the economic climate. ii

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