

Three Communication “Hubs” That, Used Well, Build Your Bottom Line

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Introduce yourself, your doctors, and your practice. This may seem the most basic of all techniques but if you aren't doing it, you aren't benefiting from it.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for any business is creating a productive and efficient work environment while boosting the company's bottom line. For ophthalmic practices relying on reduced Medicare reimbursements in a competitive market environment with a lack of skilled workers, overcoming this “challenge” can often become a monumental necessity. Fortunately, for practice administrators, our greatest challenges can often be tackled by the simplest of tools: good communication.

To fully appreciate the need for effective communication, first look at each area of your practice and identify those areas that have a direct effect on your bottom line. Although clinical efficiencies, a skilled workforce, and physician involvement will top the list, the

core areas of referral sources, patients, and staff can directly benefit from communication techniques as well.

Referral Sources

As a specialty service provider, ophthalmologists rely on targeted referrals from community doctors. For our surgical ophthalmologists, cultivating a close referral network of primary care physicians, optometrists, and medical specialists can mean the difference between a functioning medical provider and a surgically oriented practice. Although patients will directly contact ophthalmic practices seeking treatment for some of the more common conditions such as cataracts or dry eye, the majority of patients requesting appointments with a specialty care provider do so because they were referred by someone in their com-

munity. For creative administrators, this creates a special opportunity to strengthen the practice's reputation while increasing profitability.

So how does communication affect referral patterns? The providers who refer to specialty practices are doing so because they need to. They have patients who have a disease or condition that they are, for whatever reason, unable to provide for. These providers may not choose your practice, but they are choosing someone's. How do you get on their list?

First, identify the specific group of providers you want to get to know better and start there. Then try these strategies:

- **Introduce yourself, your doctors, and your practice.** This may seem the most basic of all techniques but if you aren't doing it, you aren't benefiting from it. How do

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these providers even know you exist? How do they know what kind of patients you prefer to see? If they can't find you, they can't refer to you.

- **Build a long-term relationship.** Think of this process like dating. The first date went OK, but now you're looking for a longer-term commitment. But you must be genuine—these are skilled professionals who know the difference between a one-time date and marriage potential. Get to know the providers, their staff, and their office. Use every opportunity to communicate with the practice on a professional and personal level. Talk to them.

Patients

Effective patient communication can be an incredible tool for your practice. Sometimes communication can be indirect, such as mailing written information to a new patient, and sometimes it is in the form of intercommunication, such as a discussion between one of your physicians and a patient or listening to what a patient's family member has to say. All forms of interaction are unique and all forms can have a positive impact on the patients in your practice. Although a range of communication opportunities exist, these three tools seem particularly effective:

- **Marketing.** There is a distinction between advertising and marketing—advertising is the process of publicizing a good or service through a very specific, targeted promotional effort, while marketing is a more all-inclusive process of communicating information to your audience. Regardless of

whether or not your practice is advertising, the practice must market—i.e., have a phone book listing, a website, business cards, and appropriate signage outside your building.

- **Patient collateral.** Within a medical practice, collateral refers to the printed educational material provided to patients. Brochures, appointment reminder cards, and business cards with your logo and contact information printed on them are all helpful tools. Be sure the printed collateral is consistent with your practice's brand, is easy to read, and provides enough detail to answer at least the patient's more basic questions.
- **Conversation.** At the end of the day, the most important means of communicating with patients is the old-fashioned way. Tell them what they need to know and listen to their questions. Write down their medication instructions. Tell them which way to exit the building. Assume your patients do not understand what you do all day and provide that little bit of extra attention so that they can fully understand what is going on and how your practice will care for their needs. Talk to them like human beings, and then listen to what they have to say.

Staff

Although the numbers vary depending on the source, most practices can estimate the cost of replacing an employee to be approximately 30% of that employee's annual salary. The message? Hire good employees, then keep them.

I firmly believe that organizations take on the personality of their

management. Grumpy practices tend to create grumpy employees. Just like patients, however, employees tend to be very forgiving when given the respect of proper communication. It's human nature to talk. If not properly channeled, however, "talk" will become misdirected gossip that could be hurtful to the practice. A healthy working environment encourages open, honest, and productive communication. The administrator should facilitate office chatter by opening lines of communication among staff, relaying relevant information, and encouraging a two-way communication environment that welcomes feedback and encourages new and innovative suggestions. For those of us who are communication-challenged, implementing a more formal approach can sometimes be the best way to ensure the communication channels are opened and goals are achieved. For example, take care to implement well-organized staff meetings, timely employee reviews, and ongoing training to communicate your vision, show employees that you are invested in their professional growth, and ensure that your practice is technically competitive.

Bottom Line

Although communication seems like an inherent part of our daily activities, it is clearly not something we inherently do well. Through a committed and enlightened process, however, effective communication can become a valuable tool to boost practice success while leveraging three of the practice's most effective resources: referral providers, patients, and staff. **AE**



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