



FOUR PILLARS OF A SUCCESSFUL PRACTICE

3. Obtain and maintain physician referrals

↘ Here are 10 simple strategies you can use to increase referrals to your practice

Neil H. Baum, MD

Discussions of medical marketing often begin with the three As: availability, affability, and affordability. But most physicians already think of themselves as available, likeable, and offering appropriately priced services.

How do you differentiate yourself from the competition?

Fancy stationery; a slick, three-color brochure; a catchy logo; and a Web site will not do the trick. In fact, these are the last things you need.

One of the biggest misconceptions about marketing is that, to do it well, you must spend lots of money on peripherals. In truth, there are many other actions that are far more effective and essential to marketing

than merely polishing your public relations image. **The most essential element of your marketing plan is to make your practice user-friendly.**

Nowhere is this need greater than when it comes to working with colleagues who are capable of referring patients to you—or are already doing so. In this article, I describe 10 strategies you can use to enhance your relationships with referring physicians.

1 Write an effective referral letter

To obtain referrals from your colleagues, you need to ensure that your name crosses their mind and desk as frequently as possible—and in a positive fashion.

If you interview referring physicians, you will find that prompt communication is one of the most important reasons they refer a patient to a particular provider. According to the *Annals of Family Medicine*, more than 50% of physicians state that effective communication is the reason they select a doctor for referral (**TABLE**, page 27).¹

Keep your referral letter short

The traditional referral letter is far too long, often 2 or 3 pages. It usually arrives 10 to 14 days after the patient was seen and is

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very expensive, costing a practice \$12–\$15 for each letter sent. The goal of an effective referral letter: Get it there *before* the patient returns to the primary care provider.

The key ingredients of an effective referral letter are:

- diagnosis
- medications you have prescribed for the patient
- your treatment plan.

The referring doctor is not interested in the nuances of your history or physical exam. They just want the three ingredients listed above.

For example, let's say that Dr. Bill Smith refers Jane Doe, who has an overactive bladder and cystocele. Her urinalysis is negative, so you prescribe an anticholinergic agent and schedule a follow-up visit in 1 month to check symptoms and to conduct a urodynamic study if she has not improved. Your letter to Dr. Smith would read as follows:

Dear Bill,
Jane Doe was seen for a problem of overactive bladder. I recommend [drug name] 5 mg/day. I plan to obtain a urodynamic study and cystoscopy if she does not improve on the smooth muscle relaxant after 1 month.

I will keep in touch with you regarding her gynecologic progress.

Sincerely,
Neil H. Baum, MD

Now the letter can be *faxed* to the referring doctor, often before the patient leaves the office. That way you can be certain that the letter arrives before the patient calls the physician with questions or concerns.

This is the best way to keep the referring physician informed and to function as the captain of the patient's health-care ship.

How primary care physicians select a doctor for referral

Medical skill of the specialist	87.5%
Access to the practice and acceptance of insurance	59.0%
Previous experience with the specialist	59.2%
Quality of communication	52.5%
Board certification of the specialist	33.9%
Medical school, residency	<1%

Source: Kinchen et al¹

EHRs can smooth the referral process

Most electronic health records (EHRs) have the capability to fax the entire note to the referring physician. However, if you were to ask a referring physician if she would like to read your entire note, the answer would probably be "No." Most EHRs will allow you to select fields that contain the diagnosis, medications prescribed, and the treatment plan. A sample of this kind of letter appears in the **FIGURE** on page 32.



52.5% of physicians refer their patients to a particular practitioner because of the quality of communication that practitioner provides

2 Make an effort to personally meet every physician who refers a patient

Not only that, but try to meet all *new* physicians in your area. It is important to coddle your existing sources of referrals, but don't forget to reach out to new physicians to let them know about your areas of interest or expertise.

3 Refer your new patients to referring physicians

Don't refer to the same colleagues time after time. If a doctor starts sending new patients your way, it's in your best interest to "reverse-refer" when a patient needs a primary care doctor, endocrinologist, or cardiologist.

You can be sure these referring doctors will appreciate your recommendations.

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Electronic referral letter

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October 12, 2006

D ALLEN BROWN, MD
2820 NAPOLEON STE 645
New Orleans, LA 70115

RE:
DOB:
Date of Visit: 10/12/2006

DEAR ALLEN,

Thank you for asking me to evaluate _____ for the: Chief Complaint: prostate trouble

PRESCRIPTION THIS VISIT:
Uroxatral 10 mg oral tablet, extended release, #1 once a day, dispensed: 30, refills: 5
(The purpose of all medications, mode of administration, and side effects were discussed with the patient.)

NEW PLAN OF TREATMENT:
Ordered
Serum - PSA (Outside Lab) - Ordered 10/12/06
Urine - Uroflow order - Ordered 10/12/06
Xray - Bladder ultrasound - Ordered 10/12/06

CURRENT IMPRESSION:
BEN HYPERPLASIA PROSTATE W OBSTRUCT (600.21: New With Added Workup)

I will keep you informed of _____ urologic progress.

Very truly yours,
Neil Baum

4 Create a lunch-and-learn program

You want other offices and medical staffs to get to know your staff and to be familiar with what you do. There's no better way than to create a lunch-and-learn program in your office and extend an invitation to other offices in the area. At the program, have all of the staff members introduce themselves. Provide a tour of your office and give a 3- to 5-minute lecture on areas of your gynecologic interest and expertise.

5 Acknowledge the accomplishments of referring physicians and their families

If you see that one of your referring physicians

has received an honor or award, send him a congratulatory note. If her children have been recognized for academic or athletic achievement, acknowledge this accomplishment with a note. You can be sure it will be one of the only acknowledgments they receive and will be deeply appreciated.

6 Share information with a no-meeting journal club

It's very difficult to keep up with the medical literature. It's challenging enough to keep up with the literature in your own specialty, let alone articles appearing in other specialty publications. One of the nicest gestures you can make is to copy any article that may be of interest to your colleagues and send it to them. Include a sticky note indicating where you would like them to look so that they don't have to read the entire article.

7 Share nonmedical information, too

Your colleagues will appreciate it when you share nonmedical information to let them know you are thinking of them even when you are not discussing patient care. For example, one of my colleagues collects fine pens. When I saw an article about a very expensive pen made with diamonds, I sent the story to my friend, suggesting that he tell his wife what was on his wish list.

8 Keep the referring doctor in the medical loop

If you are caring for a patient and plan to discharge her from the hospital, make sure that you or someone in your office contacts the referring doctor to inform him that the patient is being discharged so he doesn't make unnecessary rounds. Other times to notify the referring doctor:

- upon admission of her patient to the hospital
- after surgery or a procedure
- when you receive a significant laboratory or pathology report.



9 Be user-friendly


If you perform gynecologic surgery on a referred patient, be sure to dictate a discharge summary. If the patient is to be discharged with gynecologic medications, give the patient their names in writing. Another convenience for the patient: Arrange your follow-up appointment on the same day she is to return to see the referring physician.

10 Don't forget nonphysician referral sources

Nurses, pharmacists, pharmaceutical representatives, social workers, lawyers, beauticians, and manicurists—all of these

professionals are likely to refer patients to you if you keep them in the loop.

Bottom line

You can build a practice by word of mouth by doing a great job of caring for patients, hoping that they will tell others about their positive experience. However, there are other opportunities to enhance your practice—notably, by nurturing your relationship with referring physicians. Try a few of these ideas and you will certainly see your referrals increase significantly. 

Reference

1. Kinchen KS, Cooper LA, Levine D, Wang NY, Powe NR. Referral of patients to specialists: factors affecting choice of specialist by primary care physicians. *Ann Fam Med.* 2004;2(3):245-252.

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