

Four pillars of a successful practice.

2. Attract new patients

➡ By enhancing your speaking and writing skills and implementing them strategically, you can effectively draw new patients to your practice

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as long as it believes you are communicating useful information and providing value. Nevertheless, such marketing—getting the word out to the public and potential referring physicians—takes some physicians out of their comfort zone. Some doctors think that marketing is synonymous with advertising.

The truth is, you can make the public aware of your services and expertise in an ethical and professional fashion without spending large amounts of money on advertising or hiring an expensive consultant.

How?

The essence of external marketing is writing, speaking, and making use of the Internet. In this article, I review simple, inexpensive techniques to increase your visibility among your peers and in your community. These techniques do not require additional staff or anything more than minimal assistance from your hospital's public relations and marketing departments and the creation of a few PowerPoint slides that will hold the attention of your audience. A future article will describe Internet marketing strategies.

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External marketing is nothing more than making potential patients aware of your service and areas of expertise. The public truly does not mind marketing,



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Try your hand at public speaking

Few of us are natural-born orators, but if you get started on the speaking circuit and acquire effective skills, you'll be amazed at the demand for your presentations and the commensurate number of new patients filling your appointment book. When you take

ILLUSTRATION: PAUL ZWOLAK FOR OBG MANAGEMENT

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Sample fact sheet on a possible support group or public speaking topic

Overactive bladder: You don't have to depend on Depends!

Overactive bladder is a common disorder that affects millions of American women and men. Most people who have this condition suffer in silence and do not seek help from a health-care professional. The good news: Most sufferers can be helped.

Overactive bladder:

- affects 33 million American men and women
- can result in reclusive behavior
- can be a source of tremendous embarrassment
- can cause recurrent urinary tract infections
- hinders workplace interactions
- limits personal mobility
- can cause skin infections
- may lead to falls and fractures
- may lead to nursing home institutionalization
- is expensive—economic costs exceeded \$35 billion in 2008.

Help is available. No one needs to depend on Depends!

If you would like additional information on this topic, or you are interested in having Dr. Neil Baum speak to your group about overactive bladder and other urologic problems, please call (504) 891-8454 or write to Dr. Baum at neilbaum@hotmail.com.

your message to the podium, audiences have an opportunity not only to learn more about your medical topic and how it applies to their health and wellness, but also to interact with you before and after the presentation.

Most of us have been asked to give a presentation to a lay audience at some time or another. How many of us have set off with a PowerPoint presentation from a pharmaceutical company that contains information far too technical for a nonmedical audience? Is it any wonder that so few talks motivate new patients to call our practices?

How to get invited to speak at local events

Even if you have a knack for public speaking, you still need to generate invitations for speaking engagements. I systematically contact meeting planners at various churches, service organizations like the Junior League, women's book clubs, and patient advocacy groups, such as the American Cancer Society and American Diabetes Association. A

list of these organizations and clubs can be obtained from the Chamber of Commerce in your community.

When I began public speaking, I created a public relations packet and sent it to meeting planners in the community. The packet contained a brief biography that outlined my credentials, listed organizations or groups to which I have given talks in the past, and provided a few testimonials from previous audience members. I also included a fact sheet (see the box on this page) and several articles on the topic to be covered. The articles were written by me for local outlets or written by others for publication in national magazines or other lay publications.

After I delivered a talk, I hung around to answer questions. I also made sure to have plenty of business cards to hand out, as well as my practice brochure and articles that pertained to the topic I had just presented.

Don't overlook support groups and group appointments

Conducting a support group is an excellent way to target a specific diagnosis or disease state. If you can identify women who have a chronic problem, such as pelvic pain, incontinence, or endometriosis, and invite them to a meeting, you'll find that they appreciate your interest and expertise and often become patients in your practice. Women who attend these meetings get to know who you are, what you do, and where to find you.

Start by organizing your current patients. I have discovered that it is easiest to start with patients in your own practice when organizing these meetings. These women know others with similar problems and soon invite them to your group.

How to start a support group

Choose a date for your meeting. Keep the following in mind:

- Select a date 2 or 3 months in the future. Decide on several possible alternative dates as well. Don't choose a date near a major holiday. Because I practice in New Orleans, for example, I would never pick a

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- date a week before or after Mardi Gras.
- Tuesday and Wednesday evenings are the best nights of the week. Most people do not schedule social engagements during the middle of the week.
- If your target audience is senior citizens, they may not be able to attend or drive at night. A Saturday morning or weekday afternoon meeting might be better for them.
- At the meeting, provide a sign-in sheet to record the names and email addresses of all who attend. You can use this list to contact attendees later through an online newsletter.

Within 1 week after your support group presentation, send a follow-up email and appropriate additional information to attendees on your sign-in sheet. The letter should thank them for attending and let them know you are available to answer any questions. You can then add their names to your database and contact them periodically when new treatments or diagnostic techniques become available.

Ethnic communities require special attention

With so many different ethnicities in many US metropolitan areas, you may have an opportunity to attract new patients from these groups. If possible, try to learn to speak the language of the ethnic group you primarily serve—you will have an advantage in attracting foreign-born immigrants if you can speak their language. Alternatively, you can serve their needs by having someone on staff who can translate for you.

Be aware, however, that professional medical interpreters recommend employing a trained medical professional to manage the translation. Without specific training in the language and familiarity with the nuances of translating during a medical examination, diagnostic cues and treatment recommendations may be missed or misinterpreted.

Some translation services specialize in medical translation. You can contact the service and request a translator in nearly any language, including Vietnamese, Russian,

Serbian, and Afrikaans, and they will arrange for a translator to arrive at a designated time. The fees are reasonable, and using such a service ensures that you can communicate with patients when neither you nor a staffer speaks the language.

It is still a good idea for you to learn some basic vocabulary, such as greetings, farewells, and the names of body parts. Not only will this make diagnoses more efficient, it will make your patients feel welcome.

Provide translations of your educational materials for patients who are more comfortable with a language besides English. If these materials are not already available from pharmaceutical or medical manufacturing companies, have the most frequently used information translated. The nearest university or college might be a good resource. The language departments at these institutions often can refer you to people who do translations on a freelance basis.

Be sure to add information to your Web site and other social media that makes it clear that you accept patients who speak other languages.

Consider writing articles for lay publications

How many referrals or new patients do you get from articles you have written for professional journals?

There is a good chance that your answer is the same as mine: “None.”

My CV lists nearly 175 articles that have been published in peer-reviewed professional journals, but I have not seen a single referral or new patient as a result. However, I have written several hundred articles for local newspapers and magazines that have generated hundreds of new patient visits to my practice.

Become a media resource: Write, be proactive, be responsive

By writing articles for the local press, you can easily become a media resource. Reporters and editors will notice your pieces. Often they will contact you for articles or ask you



A qualified medical translator can pick up on the many nuances of communication during a medical examination

for quotations to be included in articles they are writing. If you are responsive, they will keep you in their database as an expert to call on whenever your specialty is in the news.

You can promote this transition yourself. When Whoopi Goldberg shared her experience with urinary incontinence on the television talk show *The View*, I contacted my local paper, the *Times-Picayune*, and offered to provide information about the problems of incontinence and overactive bladder and how an outpatient evaluation can often lead to cure of this disease.

What should you write about?

Topics of interest to lay readers in your community undoubtedly include wellness, menopause, cancer prevention, female sexual dysfunction, and vaginal rejuvenation. You can create an interesting article about new procedures, new treatments, a unique case with an excellent result, or the use of new technologies, such as new in-office procedures for permanent contraception.

Like medical skills, writing skills can be learned and polished. The more you do it, the better you get. The better you get, the more women you will attract to your practice.

Use your Web site to attract new patients

For most ObGyns, the majority of patients they serve come from within their community. A clinician's service area usually encompasses no more than three to five zip codes or a 25- to 50-mile radius. All of us enjoy seeing a patient who has traveled more than 100 miles to see us for a gynecologic problem. Imagine the excitement when a patient from 1,000, 5,000, or even 10,000 miles away contacts your office for an appointment. This is exactly what a Web site can do for you and your practice. (Note: In a future article, I will focus on Internet marketing.)

Blogging offers an opportunity to engage potential patients

If you have a Web site, then you've already taken the most critical step toward

marketing your practice in an increasingly Internet-savvy age. Today's patients rely on the Internet for personal health information; they also expect a level of interaction and communication from their clinician on the Web. That's because popular social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, are growing rapidly, enabling patients to use a variety of social media resources for support, education, and treatment decisions. A static Web site that consists only of your practice name, staff biographies, your office address and phone numbers, and a map to guide patients to your practice won't cut it any longer in terms of patient expectations.

Health-care practitioners are just beginning to embrace social media—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogging—as an important component of their Internet marketing strategy. Blogging is easy, quick, and free. In many cases, a blog already is integrated with the rest of your professionally designed Web site. To get started, you just need to contribute content to the blog.

Although a blog won't deliver an instant return on investment, it can, with time, build awareness of your practice and help promote your services to existing and potential patients. Blogs are driven by content, and a blog tied to your practice gives you the freedom to write and publish content that is unique to you and your practice. Written effectively, blogs present the perfect opportunity to interact with your patients while promoting your services.

Blogs also can improve your search engine ranking significantly. By adding new content to your blog on a regular basis, you ensure that search engines "crawl" your site more often. More important, blogs make it possible to dually publish content on other social media sites, functioning as the nucleus of your social media maintenance. Regular posts to your blog can be synced with your Facebook and Twitter accounts for seamless social networking.

Choose a snappy headline

Few patients will read a blog post with a headline that doesn't entice them in some



Over time, a well-written blog can build awareness of your practice and help promote your services to existing and potential patients

way. A compelling headline is essential to get your visitor to read the rest of the article and revisit your blog for new posts in the future.

Think of your blog title as a billboard. Consider that you are trying to attract the attention of drivers who have only a few seconds to look at your signage. The same is true for the title of your blog. Visitors often read the title and make a decision about whether to read the rest of the content. For example, an article entitled “Evaluation and treatment of urinary incontinence” probably would not get the eyeballs to stick, compared with a headline like “You don’t have to depend on Depends!” Doctors tend to think conservatively and may generate bland titles more suitable for a medical journal. I suggest that you think more like a tabloid journalist to attract readers to your blog.

Keep blog posts lay-friendly

Because patients will be reading your blog, remember to write for them and not for your colleagues. Be conversational and avoid overusing medical terminology that your readers won’t appreciate or understand. **Try to target your writing to the 10th grade level so that you attract both educated and less educated readers.** Some blog sites evaluate your writing to determine its grade level and will assist you in keeping your material understandable by most readers.

For example, Writing Sample Analyzer uses syllable counts and sentence length to determine the average grade level of your material (<http://sarahkyler.com/code/sample.php>). And the Readability Calculator at http://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp is also useful. In general, these tools penalize writers for polysyllabic words and long, complex sentences. Your writing will score higher when you use simpler diction and write short sentences.

Educate, rather than advertise.

Blogs should be used to support your online marketing efforts and provide patients with important information about your practice and services. **A blog is not designed to be**

an advertising tool. Using it as such a tool will cause readers to lose interest fast. If you think education first, your material will be attractive to readers and they may call your office for an appointment.

Some organizational pointers:

- **Avoid lengthy blog posts;** they can lose reader interest. Pages with a lot of white space are easier to scan and more likely to keep patients reading. Say enough to get your point across, but don’t lose your readers’ attention with irrelevant information.
- **Include subheadings and bullet points** every few paragraphs so readers can quickly browse your post for the information they want.

Provide fresh, unique content that is new and interesting. Offer advice and tips for improved health, and inform patients about new technology and treatments that are specific to your practice. For example, if you offer a noninvasive approach to a medical problem using a procedure that is new in your community, write a post on this topic and **include a testimonial** from one of your treated patients. This strategy is very effective at generating new patients.

Don’t let your content get stale

Post to your blog regularly, providing new and updated content. Once you develop an audience, keep them coming back by adhering to a schedule. Every update you make to your blog counts as fresh content—a significant factor search engines use to rank Web sites. I suggest that you consider blogging at a minimum of once a week.

We are in the age of social media. **The social media train is leaving the station, and you better get on board.** The easiest way to start is by creating and posting regularly on your blog site.

External marketing to attract new patients to your ObGyn practice basically consists of writing and speaking. If you want to market outside your practice, you need to think about putting your writing and speaking skills into action. So, speak up and get your pen or computer working! 🗣️



Keep your blog posts relatively short to ensure that your readers remain engaged with the content