

Patient education can be low-key marketing tool

By [VICTORIA STAGG ELLIOTT](#), amednews staff. *Posted April 12, 2010.*

Sometimes the best way to promote yourself is to educate patients about their health and how you can improve it.

"[Education] is probably the least expensive way to market, because you make a personal connection," said Marty Rosenberg, a principle with EthosPartners Healthcare Management Group in Atlanta.

But that salesmanship is tricky. If efforts to teach about medical conditions and their treatments look too much like marketing, they will fall flat, experts say.

Outside of a usual patient visit, education can mean providing free screenings in the office or at health events, speaking to community groups and linking to health information on a practice's Web site.

In addition, well-done educational programs tailored to the community can benefit a practice by helping build long-term patient relationships beyond the initial contact and avoiding the appearance of attempting to hard-sell medical services.

"Education is received a lot better than a marketing message," said Jamie Verkamp, director of growth and development with (E)Merge, a medical consulting firm in Kansas City, Mo. "No one wants to be sold and marketed to any more. It's about building a rapport. People who have a rapport and are engaged are more likely to be loyal and are more likely to refer others."

For example, Henri P. Gaboriau, MD, hosts free skin cancer screenings in his Sammamish (Wash.) Center for Facial Plastic Surgery. Such events are promoted through local publications, his Web site, e-mail newsletters and word of mouth. Many of those examined come back to have moles further investigated, but a significant percentage also return within five years to have cosmetic procedures, he said.

"We teach people about skin cancer. We are doing something good for the patient," said Dr. Gaboriau, who is board certified in both otolaryngology and facial plastic and reconstructive surgery. "And patients who have never come here before become regular patients."

Other practices have offered free screenings in their offices or at community events for hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis or other common conditions.

Physicians also can contact community groups or institutions and offer to speak on a topic, and audiences usually are eager for the information. Robert D. Russo, MD, a radiologist with several offices in and around Bridgeport, Conn., has presented to community groups on the different types of mammography and how this scanning modality should be used. He holds their attention with various images created by this technology, and with portable versions of his equipment.

"I have never done an event where there were not a million questions," Dr. Russo said. "The way I look at it is that it gives us more of a community presence, so people recognize us as the community radiologists. It keeps our name out there, and it helps patients to understand what the tests are, what is going to happen with the results and what they can expect."

A connection to one patient can extend to friends and relatives. For instance, Rosenberg has worked with several orthopedic surgeons who have spoken to high school sports teams and found that the initial presentation tends to reach beyond the original audience.

"For every kid that tears an ACL, there's a parent or grandparent who needs a total knee or hip replacement," Rosenberg said.

But patient education does not always require a physician to go outside the office. Health information can be provided on a physician's Web site, Facebook page or Twitter feed. Experts say these now have to contain much more than a practice's hours and insurance policies. Information can be presented in physician-authored articles or links to trusted medical news sites.

But no matter what the vehicle, the key to all of these efforts is to avoid the appearance of simply trying to sell something. This requires staying focused on information about a medical condition. For instance, when Dr. Gaboriau runs seminars on skin cancer, he doesn't mention the cosmetic procedures that also are available from him and his facility.

"I never mix them together," he said. "If you do a seminar about everything you offer, it becomes more marketing. You have to be extremely well-focused."

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