



Healthcare Marketing White Paper



11 STEPS TO EFFECTIVELY MARKET PRIMARY CARE SERVICES

THE IMPACT OF HEALTHCARE REFORM
ON THE ROLE OF PRIMARY CARE



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As a result of The Affordable Care Act and healthcare systems looking to form Accountable Care Organizations (ACO), many private practices are being acquired by hospitals to create a network of physicians and facilities. These acquisitions and market consolidations mean that referral channels are tightening and market share depends largely on primary care capacity and resources. At the same time, there is now growing competition for primary care services with pharmacies offering basic care for the same cost as a co-pay.

In this white paper, we will discuss the increasing role of primary care in patient wellness, the power of consumer choice in healthcare, and how to market primary care services.

THE INCREASING ROLE OF PRIMARY CARE IN PATIENT WELLNESS

Hospitals and healthcare systems are looking to acquire primary care offices to meet the charge of improving community wellness and eliminating unnecessary costs and procedures. With pressure to decrease inpatient procedures and hospital admissions, hospitals are turning to primary care offices and physicians to provide outpatient revenue from appointments, in-office diagnostics, downstream referrals and a general increase of marketshare.

On the flip side, primary care and private practices find it appealing to partner with a hospital or larger network to help with administrative and IT costs for advanced technology, such as an electronic health record system, to provide access to more patients, increase revenue to qualify for certain payor systems and patient care models, and to achieve a greater work-life balance.

The primary care physician is the lynchpin in ensuring accountable care success. Many studies have shown that a surplus of access to primary care results in improved population wellness, a decrease in patient readmissions and emergency room visits, a decrease in unmet care needs and a decrease in care costs. Now that millions of Americans are newly insured under the Affordable Care Act, primary care physicians are needed more than ever to treat these new populations. In addition, we have an aging population that increasingly needs care and a decrease of medical school students choosing a career in primary care.

Under these changes put in motion by healthcare reform, primary care physicians take on the role of care manager, instead of care provider, by empowering patients to maintain their health in between appointments. In theory, when the care of a specialist or an inpatient procedure is necessary, primary care physicians will refer patients to an office or hospital within their health network. Primary care offices will serve as gatekeepers of downstream procedures to ensure hospitals and specialists are only treating patients who really need it. However, until this is a reality, patients still have a lot of care choices.

THE INCREASING ROLE OF CONSUMER CHOICE IN PRIMARY CARE

While at first it may seem like healthcare reform, acquisitions and the formation of health network and ACOs will eliminate patient choice, it's actually the opposite. Patients now have an even greater choice of where to receive primary care because more and more organizations are getting into the business.

In addition to a primary care office or specific physician, healthcare consumers now have the choice of receiving primary care where they shop or at their local pharmacy, such as Walmart or Walgreens, for the same cost as a co-pay.

“Pharmacy services have evolved from strictly dispensing medications to offering services such as medication therapy management, medication education, improving medication adherence, administering immunizations and health/wellness” (Nosta, p. 1).

It doesn't always stop at primary care either. Many stores now offer specialty services, such as optical, and others are forming partnerships to be able to refer patients to specialists.

“Walgreens, for example, has formed various affiliations with larger hospital systems like Ochsner Health System in New Orleans and Johns Hopkins Medicine in Baltimore to create patient care protocols and other programs so physicians and pharmacists are in sync, reconciling what medications a patient is on, and ensuring the right pill regimens are taken” (Jaspen, p. 2).

While some patients may not like the idea of seeing a pharmacist or PA instead of a traditional doctor, the truth is that as primary care physicians are stretched thin, patients will also be less likely to see a doctor in a private office. As we move forward, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, patient educators, care coordinators and social workers will step in to help leverage physician resources and see more patients.

Considering the increased types of providers and the influx of competitors for the primary care patient, it's important to articulate the patient experience in competitive marketing terms. Hospitals, physician practices and ACOs will need to change their marketing strategy to attract patients on the ground level, rather than promoting specialty services.

11 STEPS TO PROGRESSIVE PRIMARY CARE MARKETING

Think of primary care as the biggest part of the marketing funnel. Everyone needs primary care. In fact, more people are in need than ever before due to a rise in chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and asthma. However, with the shift from primary care physicians providing care to empowering patients to manage their own health, this now stretches the funnel even wider to educate a larger audience on wellness and preventive healthcare.

Here are 11 steps to progressively market primary care services:

1. **Develop a brand promise:** The first step to attract patients to your primary care office is to develop a brand promise that differentiates your office from all the others. Why should a prospective patient pick your office instead of the one down the block? Why should a patient continue to visit your office instead of seeking care at the local pharmacy? What are the benefits to the care at your office? Figure out what you can reasonably promise and deliver on.
2. **Create a webpage for each physician:** Within the hospital or health network website, create a webpage for each physician with a direct link and SEO. On the page, include a detailed bio, a photo, a bio video and a calendar with participation in community events, appearances and speaking engagements. This will allow prospective patients to get to know the physicians better before scheduling an appointment and may deter them from searching Google to gather more information. It's also a good idea to list content and videos created by each physician.
3. **Content and video marketing:** Content and video marketing do two things: 1. Establish physicians and practices as thought leaders and experts in the field, and 2. Allow patients to get to know the physicians' care style and areas of expertise. Different topics for content can be based on each physician's specialty and seasonal or newsworthy subjects. Content marketing is especially great for wellness and patient education because it provides tools and resources to patients who are looking to take their health into their own hands.
4. **Online scheduling capabilities:** If a prospective patient is searching through pages of physicians and carefully reading through all of their content, wouldn't it be great if they could schedule an appointment right on the page? Don't create an extra step by making them pick up a phone. Convenience is key for busy patients on-the-go.
5. **Search advertising:** Search ads for specific practices are convenient for patients searching for a physician in a specific location, such as near their home or work. Dynamic search ads that insert the consumer's search query into the headline of the ad are very effective, especially when searching for specific locations.
6. **Facebook advertising:** Newsfeed ads are a great way to reach patients, especially when using retargeting. For example, if a prospective patient was searching through physicians on your hospital's website, retarget them on Facebook with related content they might find interesting or with a direct call to action to schedule an appointment now. Bonus points if you set up online scheduling within your practice's Facebook page.
7. **Community events:** It's important to reach outside the office and the internet for face time with potential patients. Offer screenings, clinics, immunizations and wellness education at community events, pharmacies and school events to demonstrate a commitment to the community. Remember that people are creatures of habit, so sometimes the best way to reach them is to interrupt their daily routines.

8. **Partner with local media:** Don't let all of that great content just sit on your website. Partner with local media to see if you can establish a community wellness column or a series of videos on patient education. Pushing content out to local news outlets will help to get more eyeballs on it and direct more people to your website.
9. **Utilize owned media:** Owned media includes any in-office marketing, such as waiting room brochures, exam room posters, flyers that physicians can use as support materials while speaking with patients, and wall graphics or environmental design. Offices can also use owned media as a way to boost patient experience, such as appointment reminder cards or a detailed write-up of medication, treatment and instructions prescribed by physicians. It's hard for patients to remember everything their doctor tells them, so this write-up helps patients to correctly treat themselves in between appointments and prevent their conditions from worsening. It's also helpful for caregivers.
10. **Patient experience:** With so many options for primary care, patients won't think twice about switching to a different physician or care provider if they have a negative experience. If marketing materials promise a short wait time for an appointment, helpful, friendly staff members and in-office services, it's imperative that the office and staff members deliver on that promise with an excellent, consistent patient experience.
11. **Reputation management:** Not only do patients search for physicians and practices online, but they check up on them via review sites such as Vitals, HealthGrades and RateMDs. Encourage and incentivize patients to write honest reviews on their experiences with the practice. Inevitably, there will be negative reviews, but what matters is how you deal with them. Respond to the negative comments publicly and offer to right the wrong to turn that negative voice into an advocate. Having a steady flow of content and video marketing can also help to drown out some of the negative comments.

THE FUTURE OF AFFORDABLE HEALTHCARE

In today's state of healthcare reform, the only options are to adapt, or to shut down. The audience for downstream procedures and service line marketing is slowly tightening. With many acquisitions and the consolidation of health systems and organizations, it's more important than ever to reach prospective patients at the primary care level and encourage community wellness to sustain the future of affordable and accessible healthcare. ■

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