

Doctoring Your Image

by
Katherine
M. Rothman

Utilizing public relations can assist in promoting chiropractic and increasing your patient base.

As recently as a decade ago, most chiropractors who had achieved a certain level of peer and patient recognition were loath to advertise their practices until HMO's began to dictate patient care and reimbursement. As the stakes in medicine were raised, even the most conservative chiropractors knew they had to change with the times or risk an empty waiting room.

Traditional advertising was the first phase in the evolution of practice promotion followed by membership on various chiropractic promotional Web sites. Soon, savvy practitioners realized that advertising might only serve to maintain the status quo of a practice without taking it to the next level. Chiropractors who sought upper income clientele began to realize that advertising did not impact their target patient. The reality is that high-income patients typically find their physicians through referrals or editorial coverage, not advertising. This niche of patients has become more important as many chiropractors have begun implementing elective alternative services. Enter public relations.

Public relations differs from advertising in that it uses editorial coverage in newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and health Internet sites to highlight chiropractors and their practices. A campaign can focus on new trends, techniques, controversies, safety issues or any topic deemed press-worthy by a publicist and media representative. Essentially, a PR campaign works by taking information the consumer needs and wants and presenting it in the form of actual stories related to chiropractic care.

Media exposure in outlets such as *Elle* or *Vogue* magazine or programs like "The Today Show" has a huge impact on prospective patients' medical choices. It reinforces a doctor's position as the expert in his or her specialty. In addition, it lends a seal of approval that cannot be achieved even through an aggressive advertising campaign.

The bottom line is that medical advertising translates as biased, while it never occurs to the average person that a doctor could employ a public relations firm to secure a media spot. Not only can public relations and subsequent media exposure increase name recognition, it can also translate into actual patients (increased revenue) as well as assure current patients that they made the right choice.

In every specialty, there are doctors whose names have become synonymous with a particular area of health care. Have these doctors reinvented the wheel to warrant such acclaim? The answer is usually no. Most have simply hired a skilled PR firm with solid media connections. Many doctors who would like to explore engaging a PR firm mistakenly feel that if they are not located in big cities such as Los Angeles, Miami, New York, or Chicago, that PR efforts will prove fruitless. This is quite the contrary. Those in the media want to have a cross-section of cities from which to draw experts. In the same vain, some suburban doctors feel that prospective patients are intent on consulting only with urban doctors. While media resulting from public relations will probably not lure a city dweller to the suburbs, it can keep the suburban doctor's patients in their own backyard. Media expo-

sure assure patients that they are receiving the same standard of care (outside of a city), while making them feel as if a "health care star" is in their own hometown.

Many chiropractors wonder why they simply cannot write their own press releases or have their office managers function in a dual

capacity as a PR pro. When doctors attempt this scenario, it has negative results or simply takes time away from the doctor practicing chiropractic. Practitioners must understand that the consumer media is not interested in the painstakingly technical depictions of techniques, as would be appropriate for a medical journal, nor are they interested in press releases that are entirely self-promotional. The medical jargon must be translated and presented in a way

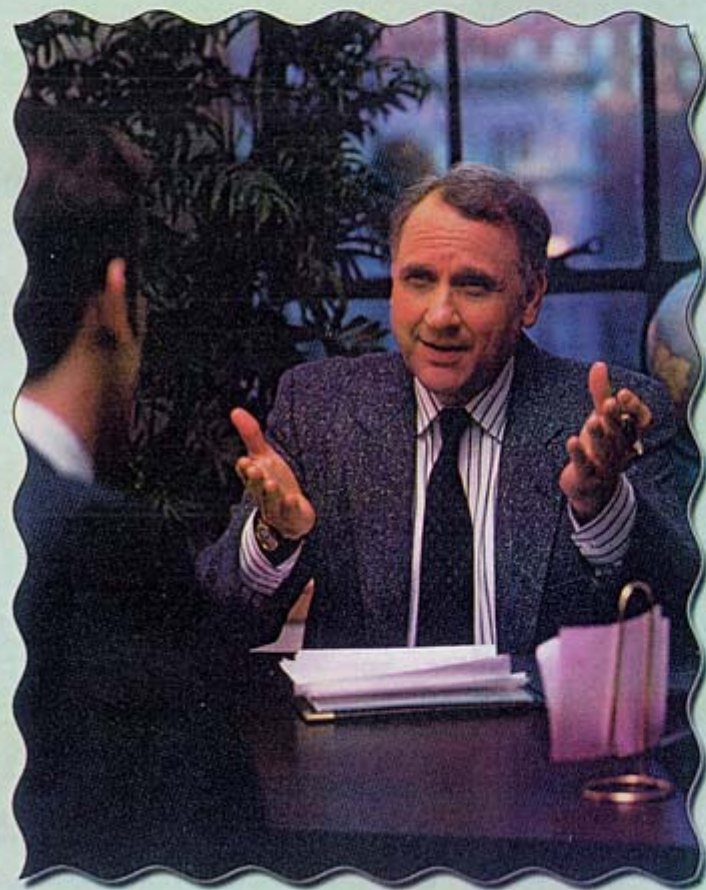
that is palatable for lay people. Developing connections with the media is a full-time job. Only public relations firms have the time to solidify connections with the press and be recognized as a key source for health care stories.

Some chiropractors encounter a moral dilemma when faced with how to best promote their practice. They may question the ethics of hiring a public relations firm. Others still naively believe that patient care will speak for itself. Times have changed, and chiropractic has indeed become a business.

If a chiropractor does decide to hire a PR firm, how can they keep their ethics intact? Recently, the *New York Times Style Section* featured an article, which disparaged doctors who gave free treatment to editors of magazines in exchange for editorial coverage.¹ Not only is this practice ill advised, it is bartering, and therefore against the code of ethics of most medical societies. Doctors who do use PR must remember not to compromise their ethics in the quest for media coverage, which means steering clear of inappropriate media outlets because of content or editorial slant, conducting oneself appropriately with the media, and not compromising philosophical beliefs to satisfy an editor or a particular story. Lastly, good conduct entails not advocating a procedure or technique without qualifying comments until long-term efficacy has been established.

Once a chiropractor decides utilize public relations, the challenge to find a good firm begins. The task is made more difficult because most doctors are reluctant to admit to their peers or friends that they have engaged a publicist. Doctors can call the Public Relations Society of America for listings of public relations firms registered with them and the Internet is an option. Many doctors do get burned by public relations firms, which often occurs because the doctor chose an individual or corporation who has little or no expertise in medical/health care PR, which is an entirely different niche than fashion, entertainment,

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restaurant, or corporate public relations. Just as one would not visit a chiropractor for laser resurfacing, it is unwise to utilize a firm that has not worked with doctors or some aspect of the health care industry.

It is of paramount importance that publicists speak a doctor's language. If they have to explain medical terminology to the publicist, this will take valuable time away from the campaign. In addition, while one firm may do a stupendous job representing a restaurant, the same media contacts are not used to represent doctors. Practitioners who seek public relations on a national level will likely have better success with a public relations firm whose base is New York City. This may come as a surprise—the public relations firm need not be located in the same city as its clients. The majority of key media outlets originate in New York. A PR firm located there can more easily facilitate personal contacts with Manhattan editors and producers.

When chiropractors are interviewing prospective public relations firms, they should ask to see press releases written for other medical clients, examples of media placements, as well as colleagues to call as references. It is important for doctors to gauge a publicist's understanding of medical terminology and the climate of chiropractic. As with advertising, there are no guarantees that media exposure will translate into additional patients.

A public relations firm should be able to give prospective medical clients an idea of what to expect in terms of media outlets to be pursued,

continuity of exposure, number of weekly hours devoted to the client, as well as various strategies for a campaign. There should also be an inherent agreement that doctors can decline any media opportunity they are uncomfortable about pursuing. Chiropractors must be mindful of that fact that public relations is a cumulative process. One television appearance or magazine article cannot judge its merits. Lastly, public relations is not a magical process. Those who make this foray must be willing to be proactive participants and respond to media queries in a timely manner with before-and-after pictures and/or statistical evidence if necessary.

Public relations, when implemented ethically and effectively, can truly help a practice gain an edge in competitive markets. It can often make the difference between remaining a best-kept secret or having a full patient schedule. Doctors who elect to go this route must keep their egos in check. Is there a downside to public relations? Yes, chiropractors just might become addicted to their newfound fame. ■

Katherine M. Rothman is president and CEO of KMR Communications Inc, a Manhattan public relations firm specializing in medicine. Rothman has addressed the topic of doctors and public relations in both trade and consumer media. She can be reached at 212-527-7511 or via e-mail, kmrpr@yahoo.com.

Reference

1. Jarrell A. Doctors who love publicity. *New York Times*. July 2, 2000:Style Section 9:1-2.



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