



## marketing minute

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**Good Buzz, Bad Buzz** Use these ideas to get people talking about you and your practice. When potential new patients hear good things about you from people they trust, they will pay attention.

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BY JULIE K. SILVER, MD



According to authors Ivan Misner and Virginia Devine, there are really only

four ways that a business (or medical practice) can market a product or service. The first is by paid advertising. The second is via a public relations campaign. The third is cold calling. The fourth, and the topic today, is word of mouth. In their book, *The World's Best Known Marketing Secret—Building Your Business with Word-of-Mouth Marketing*, Misner and Devine begin by explaining a few key concepts (which I have adapted for the health-care environment).

Everyone knows that positive word-of-mouth marketing has tremendous power. But did you know that people are much more likely to talk about you and your practice if they are unhappy with your service than if they are happy? Thus, good customer service does more to control bad “buzz” than it does to create positive word-of-mouth attention.

No matter how good a doctor you are, if you can't get people to tell other people

about your wonderful skills, you will never have a thriving practice.

Successful word-of-mouth marketing happens by design, not by accident.

Regardless of whether people speak highly or poorly about a physician, the reason word-of-mouth marketing is so successful is that there is built-in credibility when someone we like and trust tells us something. George Silverman, the author of *The Secrets of Word-*

*of-Mouth Marketing* says, “The most important reason [that this type of marketing is successful] is that word of mouth is a way of sharing experience.” Silverman goes on to explain that since we can't possibly experience everything for ourselves (too many movies and restaurants, hair stylists, dentists, doctors, etc. to choose from) we rely on the advice of people we trust. Nearly everyone relies on word of mouth for purchases. Imagine contacting the Better Business Bureau, reading *Consumer Reports*, or searching the Internet every time you need to make a decision about a product or service. You would never have time to do anything else. Most people

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save this type of research for special circumstances and for the majority of their day-to-day information rely on word-of-mouth referrals. Most of us will “ask around” or will get advice when someone spontaneously tells us about a service or product that we are interested in.

In *The Anatomy of Buzz*, author Emanuel Rosen quotes a study done by Maritz Marketing Research in which they found that “70 percent of Americans rely on the advice of others when selecting a new doctor.” Rosen thinks this is a very important thing for doctors to consider. He says, “Health is something that people talk about extensively. Doctors should take advantage of that.”

Rosen also notes that buzz in general has taken on increased importance due to several factors. First, there are so many options for consumers that it is hard to get a message across with advertising or public relations campaigns alone. Second, consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical and the advice of a respected friend or colleague goes a long way. Third, consumers are easily connected to one another via a number of different mechanisms including the Internet. This makes communication and word-of-mouth marketing much simpler to accomplish.

### Get the ball rolling

So how does one begin a “buzz campaign” that will positively market physician services through word of mouth? Rosen advises doctors to “not create buzz about their practice, but rather to create buzz about a topic that relates to their practice.” He gives the example of breast self-examination to catch early breast cancer. Rosen says, “If I am a physician, I can write a short [pamphlet] about it and put it out in the community. I can give influential community members several copies that they can pass out to others.”

This example highlights two of Rosen’s

key points. (1) Give people something tangible (even if you offer a service rather than a product) that will help to create buzz. (2) Give that tangible item to “opinionators” in the community. Rosen notes, “People who are active politically in the community are also more active about promoting products and services.”

Silverman advises physicians who want to generate positive word-of-mouth marketing to “do things that are genuinely useful to potential patients.” He says, “[Provide] genuinely interesting and useful handouts—not just stuff that is handed out by the pharmaceutical firms.” Silverman suggests that a word-of-mouth brochure differs from more traditional brochures in that it offers “something outrageously valuable so that [people] will pass it on to other people.” The key to success for these word-of-mouth brochures is that the information they present is “outrageously valuable.”

What type of information is “outrageously valuable?” The answer to this question obviously depends on who you are and what you are interested in knowing more about. One way to come up with ideas for word-of-mouth brochures is to consider the types of questions that patients ask you over and over again. If you are a primary care physician, most likely you are often asked what cancer screening tests are important, who should get them, and how often they should be done. A brochure that lists common cancers, the screening tests for these conditions, and the answers to the questions listed above would be a very valuable brochure to many people. A specialist in cardiology may want to produce a personalized brochure that lists important information about the prevention and treatment of heart disease.

Silverman suggests a brochure that lays out all of the different diabetes medications and their benefit and side-effect

profiles. He says, “[Patients] don’t know the benefits and side effects and they don’t know what to ask their doctors about.” He goes on to say that patients who read these valuable brochures are left with the impression that “this person is aggressively interested in my health.”

### Being noticed

Word-of-mouth brochures are only one of the many ways to create buzz. Silverman reports that physicians lag behind other professionals in figuring out how to create positive word-of-mouth marketing. He notes that accountants and financial advisers are well versed in presenting free financial seminars in order to generate a client base. He says, “I think that doctors have been taught that it is not professional to go after new business. They should be reluctant to do blatant sales commercials, but they should get out there about genuinely useful things.”

For more ideas on how to create buzz, you might want to check out the book, *How to Generate Word of Mouth Advertising* by Godfrey and Gregrey J. Harris. Tips from this book include giving away a unique souvenir, wearing something remarkable (e.g., badge that has special meaning) and putting a bowl of fruit in the waiting room with a sign that reads “We hope you enjoy one of our healthy snacks during your visit to our office and will mention to your friends the fresh ways we like to treat your needs.” Encouraging people to tell their friends about your services is often enough to start the positive buzz cycle.

Once you have a word-of-mouth campaign planned, you need to gauge the success of your efforts. There are a number of ways to do this, but by far the best way is to ask every patient who comes to your office how she heard about you. It is important to keep track of this information in order to determine which of your

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efforts has made an impact. In a successful campaign, you will have several things that are working in unison to spread positive word of mouth in an exponential manner. Another way to predict what patients will say about their experience when they leave your office is to put a book at the front desk and ask them to write down what they liked best about their visit. This encourages them to exit on a positive note. Finally, if your buzz campaign is really working well, you should have some pleasant surprises along the way, such as an invitation to be

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interviewed for a local newspaper.

Creating positive word-of-mouth marketing takes some time and planning. But, it is a powerful marketing tool and one that can immensely enhance your medical practice and professional reputation. Bad buzz is always a concern, but if patients have a good experience in your office, bad buzz is much less likely to get started. Rosen notes, "Bad buzz really boils down to the fact that the foundation of word of mouth is reality. Customers say what they feel. Ultimately physicians who provide valuable services will get good word of mouth." ■

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