



marketingminute

Good Impressions A physician's personal presentation, bedside manner, and practice ambiance are patients' first clues to the quality of the care they will receive. Does your image reflect your service?

BY JULIE SILVER, MD



The ways in which physicians interact with patients and handle themselves

from day to day are the keys to successfully promoting their practices and professional reputations. But with more patients to see and less time to spend with each one, the ability to leave a positive, lasting impression with patients is becoming harder to do.

In his book, *The I Hate Selling Book—Business Advice for Consultants, Attorneys, Accountants, Engineers, Architects and Other Professionals*, author Allan

Boress emphasizes that physicians are ideal candidates to promote their practices and professional reputations through their everyday encounters with patients and other professionals for several reasons. First, they are “low-key and non-threatening and have tremendous credibility.” Second, physicians are experts at “prescribing” and not “selling,” and third, “Doctors have the right perspective on fees:

They truly believe their services are valuable and that they should be paid accordingly.” (See “The Eight Universal Traits of the Top Business Producers in the Professions,” page 23).

Most of us have incorporated a variety of techniques into our daily practices that encourage a good rapport with patients. However, it is wise to review these and to look for ways that we can simply and

effectively enhance patient care and leave people feeling good about who we are and what we do.

Setting the tone

Because time spent with physicians is becoming shorter, the entire office experience has become more meaningful to patients. For instance, patients who have problems with mobility will certainly notice whether there was parking close to the building and whether the building itself was easily accessible. Once seated in the waiting room, patients can't help but notice the ambiance. Is the decor cheerful, modern, and appropriate? Is the music being played what

“Lots of physicians think that something as superficial as grooming is too far beneath their legitimate attention. It's not so. When you attend to your grooming you show respect for the people you meet, for the profession you have selected, for the patients and referral sources you serve.”

Continued

MARKETING MINUTE

Continued from previous page

the patients would likely enjoy or is it more the staff's taste? Are there plenty of interesting things to read on a variety of subjects?

In my office, I had several complaints about the lack of reading materials that would appeal to male patients. I had never noticed what magazines were out in the waiting room, but when I went to inspect, I realized that the office manager had clearly chosen things that she would like to read. Once noted, this was easy to change. We now have magazines for men and women geared for all different age groups (because my practice is very diverse).

My own experiences waiting for doctors made me think about how important this is to the visit's success. When I was pregnant with my second child, I went to a reputable obstetrician in a nearby practice. During my first visit, I noticed that the lock on the bathroom door was broken. When I went back a few weeks later (and again had to submit a urine sample), the lock was still not fixed. I mentioned this to the office manager on my way out and her attitude was very indifferent.

As my pregnancy progressed, I noticed that this busy five-physician practice had not only not kept up with minor repairs in the office, but had actually outgrown the office. On several occasions, I was kept waiting more than an hour for an appointment. To make matters worse, there were not enough chairs in the waiting room to accommodate all of the patients—most of whom were obviously pregnant and quite uncomfortable standing. Although I personally liked my obstetrician and thought he was very competent, I switched doctors. The visits to his office, with the exception of the actual time I spent with him, made me feel uncomfortable and neglected.

Although no one likes to wait, a long wait in a pleasant environment with interesting distractions, such as reading materials, leaves a much better impression than a long wait in uncomfortable surroundings with nothing to do but count the minutes.

Dressing the part

When the time comes for patients to actually meet with us, what can we do quickly and easily to make them feel at ease and that they are about to receive quality care?

Judy Bee, a management consultant to physicians and the president of Practice Performance Group in Long Beach, California, notes that one of the easiest ways to connect with patients is to dress appropriately. There is a "dress code for doctors," Bee notes, and violating this code of professional, neat, and up-to-date attire may give patients the impression that you are not giving them the "sober, thoughtful, and rational attention" they deserve.

Bee gives the example of a pediatric ophthalmologist, Louise, whose practice was not thriving. When Bee first consulted with her and the other members of her group, Bee immediately noticed how little attention Louise gave to projecting a professional image. Louise was dressed in sandals without stockings and a loose, ill-fitting cotton dress ("an attire more fitting for a patio than a profession"). Her hair was long and not styled. Louise's colleagues reinforced the poor image she projected by calling her by her nickname, Weezie, in front of patients. Bee suggested to Louise that she tidy up her appearance and use a professional title in front of patients. Although Louise initially countered that her style was designed to put the children she treated at ease, Bee eventually convinced her that the

The Eight Universal Traits of the Top Business Producers in the Professions

- They know that new business is the lifeblood of the [practice].
- They are positive and optimistic with existing and prospective [patients] and with referral sources.
- People feel comfortable around them.
- They laugh at themselves.
- They are very good listeners.
- They're givers, not takers.
- They are righteous believers in their ability to perform and the value of their services.
- They enjoy what they do and the people they work with.

Allan S. Boress—*The I Hate Selling Book*

parents of these children likely did not feel comfortable with such an unprofessional approach. Bee noted, "she was not treated with the respect she was due and her practice showed it." Once doctors recognize how patients perceive them, they can make relatively minor adjustments that yield significant results, as was the case with Louise.

Bee says that she frequently encounters the prickly subject of telling doctors to clean up their physical appearance, quite literally. In her newsletter, *Uncommon Sense*, Bee lets her physician clients know that their appearance is important. Bee reminds them that, "Lots of physicians think that something as superficial as grooming is too far beneath their legitimate attention. It's not so. When you attend to your grooming you show respect for the people you meet, for the profession you have selected, for the patients and referral sources you serve." Bee goes on to say, "If you don't know what you're supposed to look like, watch daytime TV!"

MARKETING MINUTE

Continued from previous page

Personal presentation

We all know that one of the best predictors of a physician's success is having a good bedside manner. But with doctors forced to spend less and less time with each patient, how is it possible to juggle complex medical decision-making in a 5, 10, or 15-minute office visit and at the same time ensure that each patient feels cared for and special?

While many of us actually need more time with our patients, there are ways that we can convey our interest and empathy even under the strictest time constraints. Robert Kausen, author of *Customer Satisfaction Guaranteed—A New Approach to Customer Service, Bedside Manner and Relationship Ease*, writes about having a 'presence.' Kausen emphasizes that people intuitively sense when someone is distracted. He describes having a presence as the "state of giving your full attention to the matter at hand." Kausen points out that, "People who have high presence are often described as charismatic, engaging, inspiring, attractive, and caring, or as having a good bedside manner."

Even with limited time, giving our full attention to our patients is important. This means sitting down for every encounter, listening carefully to what our patients tell us, and finally, making sure that patients leave with a sense that we genuinely care about them and will do our best to help them. Some physicians find that writing a note or dictating in front of the patient saves them time and allows more face-to-face time with the patient. This can also reinforce your recommendations to the patient.

Another way to convey empathy, concern, and genuine interest in a patient is to touch them in a non-medical manner. Although physicians need to be extremely careful in how they touch patients, a reassuring handshake or hand

on the shoulder can be an effective way of connecting with patients.

Most of us chose medicine in order to deliver compassionate care to people who are ill, vulnerable, and worried. To reinforce patients' perception that they have received that care, we must take steps to convey our concern and to reassure patients that they are indeed in good hands. ■

Julie K. Silver, MD is a member of the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Harvard Medical School and the medical director of an outpatient rehabilitation facility for Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Boston.