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Employing a Public Relations Firm

By Katherine M. Rothman

Plastic surgeons have been implementing public relations in their practices for over half a decade. In fact, they were among the first specialists to use this method of practice promotion. Now, dermatologists, chiropractors, dentists, ophthalmologists and others have followed suit. Surprisingly, the concept of engaging a PR firm is not relegated to plastic surgeons in the big cities such as Miami, Los Angeles, New York and Chicago; it has become a nationwide phenomenon. While the country was already in an economic downturn before 9/11, the attack on America has caused a full-fledged recession. Many plastic surgeons that depend largely on discretionary income found themselves with cancelled surgery and empty waiting rooms, with the exception of a small percentage. Who are these "lucky" physicians? Have they reinvented liposuction or the facelift procedure? In most cases, the answer is that the still lucrative practices prepared themselves and employed a public relations firm to ensure that their practice would thrive independent of the economic climate.

Why Public Relations?

Advertising, Internet marketing and practice management teams are all viable means of helping a practice to flourish. Many plastic surgeons find that with enormous competition, even this arsenal of expert help may not be sufficient. The editorial coverage that results from a successful public relations campaign can serve to make a plastic surgeon a "star" in his or her target area.

Although good training, surgical results and patient care is of paramount importance, in today's media-driven society, women especially place tremendous credibility in what the media dictates as chic, fashionable or of quality. The plastic surgeons who have created a name for themselves have not typically revolutionized cosmetic surgery, but more likely they have employed a publicist to create cleverly spun consumer oriented press releases which result in mentions in publications such as *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Allure*, *In Style* and others of similar prestige.

Public relations differs from advertising in that it uses editorial coverage in newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and health interest sites to highlight a physician and his or her practice. A campaign can focus on new trends, techniques, controversies, safety issues in a respective sub-specialty or any host of topics deemed

press-worthy by a publicist and media representative.

Essentially, a PR campaign works by taking information the consumer needs and wants to know and presenting it in the form of actual stories related to plastic surgery. Ensuing 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 serves to reinforce that a physician is the expert in his or her sub-specialty. In addition, it lends a cache and seal of approval that cannot always be achieved even by an aggressive ad campaign.

The bottom line is that medical advertising can sometimes translate as biased, while it never occurs to the average person that a doctor employed 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.

Misconceptions Addressed

Plastic surgeons typically have two major misconceptions. Many mistakenly feel that they are not candidates for public relations if they don't have something "new" or exciting to provide the media. The reality is that most plastic surgeons are performing the same procedures, with some simply having coined their own phrasing to make it sound innovative. The onus should not be on the physician to devise campaign ideas for the media.

A skilled publicist should be adept at spinning variations on plastic surgery topics while still being mindful of ethics and what is in the interest of good patient care. Seasoned PR pros know how to weave a story to make it exciting for the media and tie it in with a trend, season, holiday, controversy, celebrity or national news.

A plastic surgeon need not be in an urban hub to avail themselves of public relations. It is often easier for plastic surgeons outside of LA, Chicago, Atlanta, New York and other cities to very quickly reap the benefits of media coverage because it is very likely that their peers have not yet discovered this mode of practice promotion. Although suburban doctors will not necessarily lure patients from nearby cities, media coverage can indeed circumvent the mindset that top echelon surgeons are only found in major markets.

Surgeons in suburban or other areas of the country need to remember that their local market watches national programming like "Good Morning America" and "Oprah" and reads publications like *Glam*

our, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Cosmopolitan*. National media coverage does indeed have positive ramifications at the local level and most important, lends cache to a plastic surgeon. Prospective PR candidates need not be trained speakers or undergo extensive media training. The media responds best to plastic surgeons that make themselves accessible, give good "sound bites," and respond appropriately to questions without having their own self-serving agenda. It is a choice for elective surgery patients to undergo procedures. Personality is a huge determining factor in patient choice. Doctors in the media simply need to convey to the audience that they are knowledgeable, trustworthy and approachable. A good PR firm can should certainly give guidance and help a client navigate the Dos and Don'ts of media interaction.

Physician's Role in a PR Campaign

Those who decide to make the leap into public relations must be prepared to be pro-active with their PR firm. Media opportunities often arise with short notice and any PR firm is essentially at the mercy of the media. Those surgeons who apprise their publicists of new developments or techniques in the field and respond promptly to the media are those who tend to realize the greatest success.

Essentially, a practice should be functioned like a "well-oiled" machine before committing to a PR program. This should not preclude an ambitious young doctor from going this route. In fact, having media coverage under one's belt early on will quell any doubt that patients might

finance, or technology. Medical public relations is a very specialized area of PR. It is vital that a plastic surgeon employ a firm that has had extensive experience representing doctors and is familiar with plastic surgery terminology. If a physician needs to give a PR executive a crash course in cosmetic surgery, it will not prove to be a very fruitful campaign. The agency needs to have solid contacts with the media that deal in health and beauty. A firm's media contacts in these areas are tantamount to the success of a client. It is also smart to choose a firm located in an area where the media is centered. Diligent PR professionals spend significant time meeting face-to-face with editors and producers and solidifying good working relationships. It is more important that the PR firm be in close proximity to the media as opposed to the client.

When interviewing a prospective PR firm:

- Ask for examples of successful campaign tactics.
- Request to see examples of print and

have about a young doctor. In the public's mind, positive media coverage lends the proverbial "Good House Keeping Seal of Approval." A capable office manager is also essential as a point person for the PR firm. He/she can often help the account executives gather material such as patient photos and statistics, or assist in planning media shoots in accordance with a doctor's schedule.

Many cosmetic surgeons and dermatologists wonder why they simply cannot write their own press releases or have their office managers function in a dual capacity as PR pro. When doctors attempt this scenario it often ends negatively or simply takes time away from the doctor practicing medicine. Physicians 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, and writers and producers are indeed 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 medical/health care stories.

Choosing a PR Firm

There are various sectors of public relations, just as medicine has sub-specialties. One would not visit a plastic surgeon for a gastrointestinal disorder. I'k firms often have niches such as entertainment, fashion, media coverage for other medical clients.

- Assess their knowledge of plastic surgery procedures and terminology.
- Get a reasonable estimate of frequency of media coverage.
- Know the markets that will be pursued and make sure they are practice-appropriate.
- Ask for samples of press releases written for other clients.
- Get references.

- Know the account executive-to-client ratio and how much time will be devoted to the account within a given week or month.
- Ask if there are any additional expenses, such as monthly disbursements.
- The PR firm should provide client with weekly written progress reports.
- Prior to engaging a company, ask for a written proposal, which will outline a campaign strategy, and explain company policy.

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