

Healthcare PR & Marketing News™

News, perspective and solutions for healthcare executives

A Healthy Dose of PR Delivers Distinct Physician Practice Identities

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As physicians seek strength in numbers to place them in better bargaining positions for managed care contracting, they are increasingly looking to PR to promote their individual strengths and to carve out a competitive reputation.

There are 175,390 physicians who belong to medical group practices (MGPs) — nearly 26% of all U.S.

physicians, according to the SMG Marketing Group in Chicago. Last year, 6,385 MGPs became members of a chain, up 23% from 1998 and 33% of all MGPs contracted with a group purchasing organization.

Physician Promotions

Although managed care is forcing physicians to adopt group-negotiating tactics, it's also compelling them to develop stronger individual community identities. "As physician practices evolve into larger practices, patients are afraid that their one-on-one relationship [with physicians] will be threatened," says Mike Trainor, president of Trainor Associates, a strategic marketing and communications firm in Providence, R.I. "Physician marketing is best when it doesn't convey big business."

Generating this distinction in the media requires briefing reporters on more

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Women Are Most Loyal To Preventive Services

HMOs looking to earn the loyalty of women will need to focus on providing more preventive services, according to a commercial health plan survey by Caredata.com.

The survey found that when women lacked recommendations for preventive services, only 63% said they intended to re-enroll in the health plan. On the other hand, encouragement by a health plan or doctor to receive preventive services significantly increased the likelihood of women's intentions to re-enroll to 83%.

Menopausal women are where health plans can make a big difference in achieving loyalty. Only 23% of menopausal women reported receiving counseling or management of their pain, according to the study.

(Caredata.com, 404/266-2600)

Federal Terrorism Drill Tests The Limits of Crisis Plans In Three Markets

How would a disaster involving weapons of mass destruction affect your hospital crisis communications plan? Would you be able to manage the release of critical information while minimizing the panic caused by terrorist attacks? This month, a federally mandated counterterrorism drill will force hospitals in Denver, Portsmouth,

N.H., and the Washington, D.C. area to answer these questions. The drill is meant to test how quickly various emergency responders can identify and diagnose biological, chemical and nuclear attacks, conduct mass immunizations and deliver massive emergency patient care. The exercise will involve a mock news channel, coordinated by the Department of Justice and the Federal Emergency Man-

agement Agency, called the Virtual News Network, that will send out "news crews" to cover the various disasters. Officials will need to decide what to tell the public and how to best minimize wide-scale panic. This will be the first disaster exercise of its kind, involving top-level federal, state and local officials.

Although the drill is focusing on three markets, hospitals everywhere should use it as an opportunity to evaluate their disaster plans.

To simulate a real-life disaster, the date and time of the exercises are unknown and will last for 10 days. Notification will go out to all hospitals, law enforcement agencies, the National Guard and state agencies.

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than a physician's credentials, but also his or her philosophy of care. But with so many "physician experts" vying for the attention of a reporter, your pitching strategies have to be both convincing and targeted.

What works best is helping your physicians develop an eye for identifying compelling patient stories to pitch the media on. This can be a tough sell for physicians who often want to crank out press releases on the new pieces of expensive technology their practice is using, says **Katherine Rothman**, president of **KMR Communications**, a PR firm in New York that specializes in representing plastic surgeons, dermatologists and cosmetic dentists. The technology has to take a back seat to the human-interest angle. Rothman has generated significant media coverage for her clients in highly competitive markets like Miami, Los Angeles and New York by pitching story ideas that reinforce the importance of using board-certified plastic surgeons for cosmetic procedures and by highlighting patient scenarios with dramatic cosmetic outcomes.

Best-Kept Secret

PR that regularly educates on a life-and-death health condition can rescue a practice from anonymity and boost targeted patient awareness. This is the tactic **Tanner Spencer Gould (TSG)** used to position an inpatient psychiatric clinic in Salt Lake City as a leading resource for women with severe eating disorders. When the agency began working with the clinic a few years ago, only 40% of the clinic's beds were being used. It had done minimal PR and primarily targeted college students who are at highest risk of having eating disorders. But college students are often in denial about this condition, which keeps them from pursuing medical help, says **Mike Judson**, TSG's VP of PR. TSG worked with the clinic on pursuing media opportunities that educated the family and friends of loved ones who exhibited signs of bulimia and anorexia.

Holidays provided the best opportunities to spotlight this issue. TSG briefed

reporters on why holidays are a difficult time for people with eating disorders, provided information on patients who were willing to discuss the condition and

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— **Mike Trainor**,
Trainor Associates

positioned the clinic's physicians as experts on the topic. The holiday angle generated lengthy coverage from four major newspapers in the state, talk radio and network TV, says **Judson**. On the national level, the center was involved in a two-part series on NBC that looked at the media's influence on eating disorders.

These efforts helped to catapult the center's reputation as a top-notch clinic for eating disorders first regionally then nationally. It now runs at 85% capacity and often has a waiting list, says **Judson**.

Promoting General Medicine

While specialty areas like plastic surgery and eating disorders provide ample opportunity for dramatic story ideas, it can be tough to identify compelling patient-focused story angles for primary care specialties because the areas of medicine are so general and broad in scope. Getting these physicians on the media's radar screen requires more community outreach, says **Bob Sommer**, executive VP and principal of the **MWW Group** in East Rutherford, N.J. He suggests pursuing speaking opportunities at key venues like schools and senior facilities that position physicians as credible resources of primary care information. These opportunities allow physicians to become recognizable voices of authority among the media, says **Sommer**.

Reacting to breaking health news also is a key way for primary care physicians to land consistent news coverage. Their

perspectives on national HMO issues, wellness trends and preventive medicine services allow reporters to localize these hot-button topics. Media accessibility,

however, is key. Once reporters decide to use a physician in a story, they need immediate follow up, usually within an hour. "It's important to establish ongoing media relationships that offer 24-hour access to physicians," says **Tom Lannan**, director of account services for **Health Communications** in Memphis, Tenn., which represents 10 physician practices. Lannan suggests advising physicians to develop a media response schedule on a weekly basis. Although this can be a time-consuming exercise, it's worth the effort. Reporters are more apt to rely on physicians that have established a solid track record of delivering last-minute, credible quotes.

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Online PR Catches On With Physicians

Physicians are finding that developing a solid online identity is just as important as their offline efforts, especially those who belong to practices that want national recognition. The Internet removes the geographical barriers of traditional PR by allowing physician practices to promote their Web sites as media resources on the local, regional and national level. In addition to posting press releases on medical service offerings, physician Web sites are ideal vehicles for:

- promoting the medical research the physician practice is involved in;
- demonstrating technical medical procedures with graphics;
- featuring the news coverage the physician has been included in with additional commentary and corrections, if necessary; and
- providing opportunities for patient feedback, questions and comments on key health issues.