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Many Physicians Are Implementing Public Relations into Their Practices.

by Katherine M. Rothman

As recently as a decade ago, most physicians who had achieved a certain level of peer and patient recognition were reluctant to advertise their practices until HMOs began to dictate patient care and reimbursement. Soon after, sub-specialists such as gynecologists and internists, were performing lucrative elective procedures that were once the sole domain of plastic surgeons and dermatologists. As the stakes in elective medicine are raised, even the most conservative plastic surgeons and dermatologists knew they had to change with the times or risk an empty waiting room.

Advertising was the first phase in the evolution of practice promotion. Soon, savvy practitioners realized that advertising might only serve to maintain the status quo of a practice without taking it to the next level. Cosmetic surgeons and dermatologists, who sought an upper income clientele, began to feel that advertising did not impact their target patient. The reality is that those with disposable income for cosmetic procedures typically find their physicians through referrals or editorial coverage, not advertising.

Enter Public Relations

Public relations differs from advertising in that it uses editorial coverage in newspapers, magazines, radio, television on the Internet to highlight a physician and his or her practice. A PR campaign can focus on new trends, techniques, controversies, safety issues in a subspecialty or any host of topics deemed press-worthy by a publicist or media representative. Essentially, it works by taking information the consumer needs and wants to know and presenting it in the form of actual stories related to dermatology or plastic surgery. Ensuing media exposure in outlets – such as *Elle* or *Vogue* magazine or programs like “The Today Show” – have a huge impact on prospective patients’ medical choices. It serves to reinforce that a physician is the expert in his or her subspecialty. In addition, it lends a cache and seal of approval that cannot be achieved even by an aggressive ad campaign. The bottom line is that medical advertising translates as biased, while it never occurs to the average person that a doctor employs 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 have made the right choice.

In dermatology, plastic surgery, ophthalmology, and now even holistic medicine, there are physicians whose names have become synonymous with a particular subspecialty. Have these doctors reinvented the wheel or discovered the fountain of youth 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 the prospect of 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 a cross-section of cities from which to draw experts. In the same vein, 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 patient population in their own backyard, which is the biggest battle faced by suburban physicians. Media exposure can serve to ensure the patient of receiving the same standard of care (outside of a city), while making them feel as if a “medical star” is in their own hometown.

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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 representatives. 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. 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 PR firms have the time to solidify connections with the press and be recognized as a key source for medical/healthcare stories.

Some plastic surgeons and dermatologists 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 the surgery will speak for itself. Times have changed, and medicine has indeed become a business. It is a reality that prospective patients give more credence to a write-up in *Vogue* or *Allure* than a doctor’s training or contributions to scholarly papers.

If a plastic surgeon or dermatologist does decide to engage a PR firm, how can he or she keep their ethics intact? Recently, the *New York Times* style section featured an article that disparaged doctors who give free surgery to beauty editors of magazines in exchange for editorial coverage. Not only is this practice ill advised, it is bartering, and therefore, against the code of ethics of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. Doctors who do use PR must remember not to compromise their ethics in the quest for media coverage.

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PRACTICE PROMOTION

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This means steering clear of media outlets inappropriate because due to the 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 surgeon has decided to use public relations, it can often be difficult to find a good firm. 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. The Internet is also an option. Many doctors do get burned by public relations firms. This usually occurs because the physician has engaged an individual or corporation who has little or no expertise in medical/healthcare PR, which is an entirely different niche than fashion, entertainment, restaurant or corporate public relations. Just as one would not

visit a chiropractor for laser resurfacing, it is unwise to engage a firm that has not worked with doctors or aspects of the healthcare industry. It is of paramount importance that publicists are able to speak a doctor's language. If physicians have to explain to their publicist what a blepharoplasty is, or the difference between ultrasonic liposuction and the tumescent technique, 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 a physician.

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Although this may come as a surprise, the public relations firm need not be located in the same city as its clients. Doctors who seek

public relations on a national level will likely have better success with a public relations firm whose base is New York City. The majority of key media outlets originate in New York City. A PR firm located there can more easily facilitate personal contacts with Manhattan editors and producers. Such alliances will undoubtedly be fruitful for clients.

When dermatologists or plastic surgeons 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 the physician's respective subspecialty.

As with advertising, there are no guarantees that media exposure will translate into additional patients. A PR firm should be able to give a prospective medical client some idea of what they can 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 a physician can decline any media opportunity he or she is uncomfortable about pursuing. Physicians must be mindful of the 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 pro-active 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 surgery schedule. Doctors who elect to go this route must keep their egos in check and adhere to the Hippocratic Oath. Is there a downside to public relations? Yes, physicians just might become addicted to their newfound fame. ■

About The Author

Katherine M. Rothman is the president and CEO of KMR Communications Inc., a Manhattan public relations firm specializing in medicine. The firm's clients include leading plastic surgeons and dermatologists nationwide, in addition to other subspecialties of medicine. Rothman has addressed the topic of doctors and public relations in both trade and consumer media. To reach Rothman, call 212-527-7511; or e-mail: KMRPR@yahoo.com

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