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The Three Areas of Marketing

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As you develop your acupuncture practice - on your own or with others - you will need to know how to get the word out about you and your Chinese medical therapies. There are three main ways of marketing your practice: external, internal and community. Understanding what they are and how they work is of great importance to your practice.

To begin, we must understand that each of these areas of marketing should be a separate but important part of your overall practice-building strategy. Acupuncturists who rely on only one area will find that they have a difficult time getting a practice started quickly.

Next, we need to know that at different stages in the development of an AOM practice, there are different ways to successfully market that practice. A clinician who opens up a new practice, but only relies on referrals for gaining new patients, will find that the process is slow-going, and often takes years. Not many people know you are there, and there is no way for them to find out about you, except through those who already know you. On the other hand, a practitioner who has a strong and steady practice, with a large number of referrals, is not well-served by spending a lot of money on print advertising. That practitioner would, however, benefit through the patient retention practices of internal marketing and strong customer service.

Here is a brief overview of each of the three types of marketing. The first and most obvious is the external marketing approach. This is how you let a large number of new people know who you are and what you do. External marketing is the most expensive of the three forms of marketing, so it is important that you have a strong understanding of how this type of advertising works. Otherwise, you could invest a significant amount of money and not be in a position to get the most back from your investment. Knowing how to use this type of marketing effectively - from the start of your practice to the time when it is strong and vibrant - will help you make the most of your investment.

This approach centers on the many types of advertising you often see: newspaper ads, flyers, posters, press releases, e-mail campaigns, and similar mass-marketing efforts. The external approach is directed at people who do not know about your practice and what you can do to help them.

External marketing is a time-tested way to connect with new patients. To utilize it effectively, you must understand that this type of advertising works in a particular way. It has to stand out visually in the location that you place it, while conveying a sense that your business is trustworthy and professional. It must also connect with the needs of the patient in a way that helps them to recognize that you might be able to help them meet that need.

This type of advertising works over time. Many practitioners, not understanding this, make common mistakes. Some run ads only once, and become disappointed when the phone does not ring off the hook. Others run an ad for four to six weeks, and see nothing that really improved their practice.

Either they did not track their marketing efforts by asking all new callers how they found out about their practice, or they did no occasional follow-up ads to continue the momentum of the initial run. They did not understand that external marketing works on people slowly. An advertisement needs to be seen several times for it to connect, and people may not need your services at that time. But through consistent effort, awareness of your presence in the community is built, so when they do need you, there is a greater chance they will choose your practice to call.

The second method of connecting with patients is internal marketing. There are three important reasons for doing this type of marketing. One is to educate existing patients on the benefits of the therapies available through your practice, and to introduce new therapies you develop or add to the practice. Two, this approach helps you stay connected to your patients in a gentle way. This helps keep you in mind if they decide to use your type of services again after a break in treatment. Three, you educate your patients as to the benefits of acupuncture therapy and how it is helping them, which inspires them to continue care with you. They realize the benefit you give them, and can communicate what you are capable of to their families and friends. This works to create a natural referral network.

Internal marketing is necessary if you are going to get your acupuncture practice to a stable, consistent level of business. Things like a monthly newsletter (print and/or e-mail), patient surveys, thank-you cards and gift certificate programs are all ways to create and maintain strong relationships with existing patients. This type of marketing takes less money, but requires strong attention to detail in the daily running of your practice.

The third method of connecting with new and old patients alike is community marketing. This approach consists of being active within your local community. Many times you can gain new patients and get into corporate settings by being involved with local civic and business groups. This approach combines the education aspect of internal marketing with print marketing tools to get the word out that you are there and can help with many health concerns and wellness care. This approach takes the most time and energy, but can be highly effective in both the startup practice and the well-established one.

These three areas are essential parts of your practice building and patient retention systems. Use them well - on a strong foundation of spiritual practice and character development - and your practice will thrive.

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