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INSTITUTE FOR PODIATRIC EXCELLENCE & DEVELOPMENT

Developing Physician Referrals for the Podiatric Practice

This learned skill pays long-term dividends.

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Tips from the Trenches is a new every-issue column featuring practice management issues, and is written exclusively for PM by members of the Institute for Podiatric Excellence and Development (IPED). IPED's mission is to motivate, inspire, and synergistically bridge the gap between students, residents, new practitioners, and seasoned veterans in the field of podiatric medicine. They are committed to the idea that mentors with passion to share and mentees eager to learn make a powerful combination that allows IPED to bring and renew a full life to podiatric physicians, their practices, and their well-being throughout the U.S. and beyond.

The backbone of any new healthcare practice is the ability to communicate with your colleagues. The traditional methods of obtaining referrals from your colleagues usually involve trial and error. Some of the methods of obtaining referrals from colleagues are by accident or happenstance. One of the cardinal rules for a beginning doctor was to always be available. If a new doctor does a good job with every patient, gradually the word-of-mouth method will start working. However, that method may require the patience of a saint as it may take several years for word of mouth to take effect.

This article will provide ideas that any doctor can use regardless of the years in practice, the location where he\she practices, or how large or small a group he\she belongs to. This article will offer suggestions that are easy to implement into any practice with minimal expense and by using your existing staff. This article will help you focus your efforts to obtain and maintain referrals not with a shotgun or the scattershot approach, but with a focus like a laser.

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It is an objective for most doctors to develop relationships with referring physicians in their community.

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In developing relationships with referring physicians, you are providing them the option to recommend your services to their patients. Once the physician recommends your practice as a source of medical care, you then become an extension of the referring practice and will be perceived as a valuable resource of care for a referring physician as opposed to a doctor soliciting to increase his/her referrals.

These strategies and steps will not only change your mindset in approaching these physicians but the way you are perceived by those offices as well. If you follow a few of these suggestions, you will create a true win-win situation for your referral sources, and for your practice.

It is important that we understand the methodology of "The 2 P's of Success": persistence and presence. It is persistence that will get you through the door of the doctor's offices, and it is your continued presence that will keep you in mind when the referring doctor needs your services and expertise. The objective is to find the methods of being persistent without being pushy, and maintaining a consistent presence.

In the beginning, it is necessary for the doctor or a member of his\her staff to routinely visit your local physicians' offices. Prior to taking your first steps into the community and seeking to develop these relationships, there are a few items to create that will directly support your initiative. The first of these items is an insurance list for your practice. You can create this practice insurance list, which includes the following things:

1) Your practice information (name, contact information, website, etc.)

2) A list of all the insurances your practice accepts

3) Each of the physicians from your practice and their individual NPI numbers

4) Your practice's group NPI number

5) A date when the list was created, or updated

It is easy to create this list in Excel. It is best to keep your list to a single page and make sure the font is at least 12-14. In addition, it is highly recommended that you laminate this insurance list prior to distributing it to the physician's offices. By laminating the list, it is less likely that it will be lost or discarded. This list simplifies the referral process for any office by providing all the information needed if they choose to make a referral to your practice.

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To work with your practice insurance list, you'll want to create a "practice referral card". (Figure 1) If you are in a practice as a solo practitioner, business cards will serve the same purpose. This referral card will be handed to the patients who are referred or recommended to your practice. A patient being referred to a multi-doctor group who is given a business card is more likely to see only the doctor whose name appears on the card. These two items provide all of the necessary information, including your website and e-mail address, and makes it easy for these offices to make a referral.

The next step is to visit these doctors' offices. An effective way to take this initial step is to visit your local hospitals and ask the medical staff office for a medical staff directory. This will provide you with a list of all doctors on staff at the hospital and their contact information. The directory is usually divided into the var-

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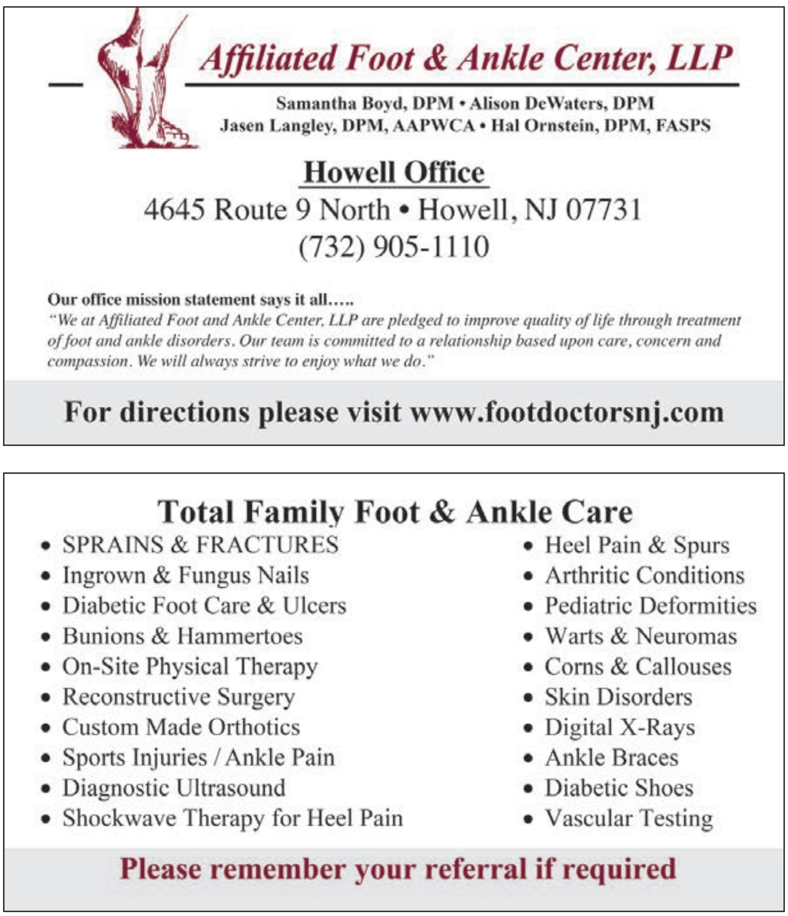

Figure 1: Practice referral card

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ious specialties, which will make your search much easier and more targeted. For example, as a podiatrist, you will want to contact all the internal medicine doctors, family practitioners, endocrinologists, pediatricians, geriatricians, and so on. You want to maintain a presence with your strong referral sources by consistently visiting, and focusing on specialists who can best support your practice.

Once you create a list of potential referral sources to visit, you can then begin the process of introducing yourself and your practice. First, consider how you are dressed when you visit a doctor's office. As a physician, consider wearing your white doctor's coat. If you are dressed in a suit, the office staff may assume you are a pharmaceutical sales rep and may create a barrier to your entry. If you choose to have others visit these offices on your behalf, such as practice representatives, they will have to work around the barrier.

When taking your first step into an office, you want to practice E.A.R., or Enter, Analyze, and React. This is a process to make decisions about your next action in that office.

Enter

A critical part to your success in developing relationships with these offices is to be seen as a "ray of sunshine" when you enter the office. Walk in smiling, hold the door for patients walking in behind you, wish the people in the waiting room well, etc. This is a very easy task while being so very important to your success because the front office, also known as the gatekeepers, watch these things and will react to you based on both your verbal and your non-verbal communication, or actions.

Analyze

Take a look at the environment you are walking into when visiting a doctor's office. Is the waiting room filled with people or is it fairly empty? Is there a line of 10 patients at the window waiting to check in? Are all three of the front office staff on the phone, while faxing and trying to speak to patients, or do they seem like they would have a moment to give you their full attention? Analyze the atmosphere when visiting these offices and react based upon what you see.

React

Your reaction to what you see when entering a doctor's office is crucial to the success of your efforts. React by keeping this question in your mind: "If this was my office, how would I want someone approaching me?" It is the answer to this question that defines your reactions as a relationship-building tool.

For example, if the waiting room is full of people, do what is called a "quick visit". Stop at the front desk, drop your card, and say, "I am a doctor and I know what it is like to be busy. I will stop back again when you are not so busy". This one simple act strongly distinguishes you from a sales rep, while at the same time showing the office staff you respect their time. This will be remembered and your interaction with them the next time you see them will be much warmer.

Another example is letting patients go in front of you while at the front desk or on line. Even if you are mid-conversation with a front office person, simply say, "Excuse me, I'm going to let this patient go first." With this action, you've shown that you respect the time of the patient, who is always number one. "React" can be applied in many different situations when visiting doctors' offices, and here is something to keep in mind. When reacting to a situation such as letting a patient go in front of you in line, you let the front office see your reaction, and they will appreciate and remember it.

Now on the other end of the spectrum, you can walk into a doctor's office that is a prime environment for you to open a dialogue. If the reception area is empty, the phones aren't ringing, and you are greeted with a smile from the person at the front desk, this is the opportunity for you to connect. Introduce yourself to the front desk personnel, and be sure to ask for their names.

Keep a record of each doctor's office you visit and the staff members' names. One way to do this is with a smartphone or digital planner. Enter each doctor's office individually, and then enter all the staff members' names in the notes, or custom field area. Put something next to their names to recall them, such as "wears glasses" or "sits at the front desk check-in area".

In addition, you can also use acronyms for each person's position in the office such as OM for Office Manager, or FD for Front Desk. Now, next time you visit, you can call the staff by their names, which will endear you to them. Utilize your charm and humor to break the ice when initially speaking to employees at an office.

In essence, think of it as you are "trying to make friends" as opposed to "discussing business." If you feel

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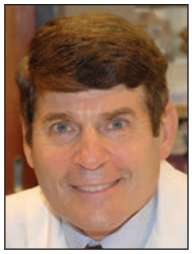
it is going well on your initial visit, provide them with the insurance list and about 30 or so referral/business cards that we discussed earlier in this article.

If your initial visit seems a bit cold, hold off on providing these until your second or third visit because you want the full attention of those to whom you are speaking. If they are not interested in speaking to you, they will not be engaged in what you are saying or the great tools you are providing them. Simply use the visit as an opportunity to introduce yourself, explain briefly who you are and that you will be stopping back every so often. Remember, when visiting these offices, be a "ray of sunshine" and be persistent in becoming "friends" with each of the offices by consistently visiting and maintaining a "desired" presence in each office.

The process of developing physician referrals is the art of relationship building.

Bottom Line

The process of developing physician referrals is the art of relationship building. By using E.A.R. and the two Ps, persistence and presence, you will endear yourself to your referring physicians and, as a result, new patients will be coming your way. **PM**



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