

How To Become (Almost) Famous: A Guide to Public Relations For The Podiatrist.

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You're watching the 6 PM TV News and you hear the anchor say, "Next up, Tips on Good Foot Health." You wait anxiously during the Toyota commercial thinking, "This could be great for my practice" but wondering who will be featured as the expert in this story. Will it be a podiatrist? If so, how and why was he or she selected?

The segment begins and you are surprised to see Dr. Jones, a local DPM and former classmate of yours being interviewed. He appears confident and impressive. You just know although you may pick up a few extra patients as a result of the exposure, his practice will be booming over the next few weeks. Later that week you pick up your local newspaper and see an article on foot care by Dr. Jones. You remind yourself that Dr. Jones and you used to study together. Your knowledge base was nearly identical, yet he's getting a lot of free publicity that you aren't.

The name of the game is public relations and marketing. It's likely that you received little or no training in it during your years in podiatry school. Sure, you can hire a public relations firm for several thousand dollars a month to do all the legwork for you. or you can learn to do it yourself. In this exclusive Internet series, we'll teach you some of the best secrets of the trade, so you too can become (almost) famous.

Good public relations is not an accident. Rather it is the culmination of careful planning and developing a coordinated strategy. Just going out there and randomly trying things is ineffective compared to a designed program. In fact, a haphazardly planned public relations campaign can actually be counterproductive. One poorly designed or executed event can undermine all previous successful efforts.

For example, doing something tacky like handing out or mailing "free consultation" coupons, will completely destroy your image as a "prominent authority" in your field. Could you imagine world-renown cardiac surgeon Michael DeBakey including such a coupon in a ValPak?

True, direct mailing can be a cost-effective way of generating new patient flow. In the short run, you'll make some fast money and maybe even build a successful practice. The problem is problem is the lasting

image that you will leave in your community and among potential referring doctors. If you go to the grocery store, you have a choice; buy the expensive brand name or the cheaper generic product.

Patients are like consumers, some will gravitate to the lowest cost generic podiatrist. Others will look for the most qualified practitioner they can find.

Basically, judging the quality and competency of DPM's is highly subjective. This means that in the final analysis, you have control on how you want to be perceived and what type of patient you want to attract.

The principles discussed also apply in a managed care environment. After all, patients often have a choice of podiatrists in a particular panel. Additionally, often your image will determine if you will be accepted into a panel in the first place.

The bottom line elements are image, presentation, establishing contacts and execution.

Image

Image is way that the public perceives you. While we all like to believe that substance is what matters (after all it should), the reality is that the public forms its own perception of people based on the image you portray.

A large part of image is appearance. This encompasses everything from how you dress, what your office looks like, how you are listed in the telephone directory, to even the car you drive. Everything you do or say can affect your image. Even things you don't do, like failing to contribute to a particular cause or charity can impact on your image. Once you manage to see the bigger picture, you begin to see how attention to detail is the difference between being average or being exceptional.

Dress For Success

Walk down any street and look at how people are dressed. It should be obvious who is successful and who is not. Successful people dress well, even when they dress casually. Jeans are fine, unless they are dirty or have holes in them. Of course as we mentioned, appearances can be deceiving, so that someone who looks successful may actually not be or vice versa. The lesson for you is always to make a conscientious effort to always look your best.

Spruce Up Your Office

Your office is one of the most important elements of your practice. A well-designed public relations campaign will succeed in bringing large numbers of new patients to your practice. If however, your office does not meet or exceed these patient's expectations, you will not keep these patients or the valuable referrals they can generate.

Your office should be consistent with the image you wish to portray. Is it clean, modern spacious with a high-tech look? Or is it old, dilapidated, dirty, and cluttered? Before you plan on spending your valuable time and money on a public relations campaign, be sure to get your house in order. This may be as simple as putting a fresh coat of paint on your walls, replacing old furniture and/or equipment or it may be as extensive as moving your entire office to a larger, more modern facility.

You should also be considering a particular motif for your office. If you specialize in podopediatrics, for example, you'll want to have a children's theme running through your office including child care magazines, toys for children, small chairs, etc. If it's sports medicine, you'll want all sorts of athletic related pictures hung on your wall, maybe even some sports memorabilia such as a pair of autographed Pele soccer shoes displayed.

Drive For Success

You really don't need to drive a luxury car to reflect success. We recently visited one of the most successful DPM's in America. You'd think maybe he'd own a BMW, Mercedes, Cadillac, or Lexus, but in fact he drives a 2 year old minivan. The important point is that the car was clean and functional. In contrast, we visited a less successful DPM and was shocked to see him driving a rusty old jalopy.

The point is not to impress, but rather not to ruin the carefully crafted image you have built. The reality is that if you drive a dirty, rusty old car it gives the impression that perhaps your practice is also not quite up to snuff. If you can't afford to buy a new car, consider leasing one. It's a tax deduction worth taking. In any case, whatever you drive should not serve as a potential source of embarrassment to you.

Creating a Niche

One of the secrets of public relations is to find an appropriate niche.

Too often podiatrists attempt to be everything to everybody. Unfortunately, it's impossible to be the foremost expert in surgery, biomechanics, dermatology, podopediatrics, sports medicine, diabetes, and rheumatology all at the same time!

The key is to zero in on one particular sub-specialty and become a respected expert in that field. Realize that become an authority does not come overnight. It takes work, study, commitment and a particular passion. Select a topic in which you already have a good background in and most important one for which you feel a passion.

Building Your Credentials

Behind the "form" which is at the heart of public relations is always a good deal of substance. Substance is authenticated by the obtaining of credentials. Let's say you have decided that sports medicine will be your chosen field of expertise. The appropriate credentials would include membership in, then fellowship in the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine.

Once you're so credentialed, you'd also want to be affiliated with a local sports team as their sports podiatrist. Building your reputation is like constructing a building. You start with a strong foundation and build upon it. Initially you might volunteer as the team podiatrist for a local high school or Little League team. Besides being a method of building credentials, you will also establish up a great base for referrals.

After you've gained experience at this level, you have the basis of approaching a college or minor league team. As you can see, the more experience, skill, training, and credentials you obtain, you more easily you can rise to the next level.

The same guidelines apply to every sub-specialty you choose. You need to get involved at the entry level and work you way up.

The Write Way to Build Credentials

Contained within the word "authority" is the word "author." There simply is not a better way to establish yourself both within the podiatric community as well as the lay community than writing. One article in a national magazine, for example, will bring in more patients to your office than a similar advertisement..and instead of paying for an ad, the magazine will actually pay you!

Articles are an effective way of telling the world that you are

competent. An advertisement is generally perceived as self-serving as opposed to a well-written and informative article. The astute author is careful to keep his or her ego out of the article, as this can be counter-productive. It's fine to list your city/state in the bio. It's inappropriate to list your street address or phone number.

Again, the general principle is to start at the entry level and work your self up. Submitting your first article to the New York Times would be analogous to applying for your first job as team podiatrist for the New York Yankees. What you need to do is to hone your skills and start at the very local level.

Unfortunately, most podiatrists receive little or no training in the art of writing. It's a big mistake to submit a poorly written article anywhere. The effect of a disjointed article containing numerous spelling and typographical errors is to undermine your professionalism. Any article should be first spell checked and grammar checked. It should then be reviewed by an English teacher, editor, or someone with a similar background. Remember it's not only what you have to say, but how you say it.

You can enhance your writing skills by enrolling in a writing course at a local college. Of course the best way to improve your writing ability is to write often and have your work critiqued.

One organization you may wish to join is the American Podiatric Medical Writers Association (PO Box 750129, Forest Hills, NY). The APMWA publishes a quarterly newsletter containing writing tips and provides its members with free books on writing. The APMWA also serves as a clearinghouse for national lay publications and lists DPM's by subspecialty.

You can also get assistance from the public relations department of the APMA and its state components. They can provide you with pre-written stories that you can use (or modify) with your byline for publication in local newspapers. Even if you don't use these, you should study them to see what a well-written article looks like.

Generally, the best way to get any article published is to first send a query to the editor. In your letter, you should succinctly summarize what your article is about and why the publications readers would be interested in it.

Sample Query Letter

A query letter should contain a hook that will interest the editor in

reading the entire article. For example:

Dear (editor's name)

Millions of people won't be visiting the beach this summer and it has nothing to do with fear of the water. The real reason, embarrassment, is because they have thick ugly and discolored toenails, a condition known as fungal or mycotic nails.

In my article, "New Therapies Offer Hope For Ugly Toenails", I discuss the cause, prevention, and treatments for this infectious and contagious disease. In recent years both new oral and topical medications can help eradicate this annoying condition.

If you are interesting in reviewing this timely article, please contact me as your earliest convenience.

Yours truly,

Naturally, if you have relevant credentials, you would include them as well. For example,

" I am currently President of the American Society of Podiatric Dermatology" or similar credentialing statement would increase the probability of acceptance.

Another way to increase your chances of acceptance is to include a copy of a previously published article. The general rule of public relations is that the more you accomplish enables you to accomplish more.

Laying Down Community Roots

The prime target for public relations is in your own local community. Being featured in the national media never hurts, but realistically most potential patients aren't going to travel thousands of miles to visit you in your office, whereas people in your town or city will.

Two decades ago I had the opportunity to visit the legendary Thomas Amberry, DPM of Long Beach, CA. A colorful pickup with the painted "toe truck" was parked outside his office. Inside I expected to see his Olympic Gold Medal and lots of autographed basketballs. After all Tom is arguably the best foul shooter that ever lived.

Instead I was amazed by the virtual museum of podiatric memorabilia that lined every wall. Dr. Amberry wore feet all over his shirt and he was adorned with every manner of foot jewelry. Tom's love and passion for

podiatry was self-evident and his practice highly successful.

It should be noted that Dr. Amberry has made countless appearances on national and local television as a foul shooting expert but he is always sure to mention that he is a podiatrist.

When I returned to New York, my first agenda was to redecorate the office. I had seen some wonderful drawings of the "Shoes of Broadway" in the famous Sardis Restaurant. I contacted the artist and asked if I could purchase lithographs of these paintings. She was pleased to not only sell me them but to personally autograph them.

That investment had an unexpected return. She not only became my patient, but over the years referred a large number of patients from New York's artist community.

I also purchased a ring in the shape of a foot and lots of shirts with feet or the word "podiatry" on them. It's surprising how many people will stop you to inquire as to whether you're a podiatrist. Earlier this week while exercising at my local health club a woman saw my Podiatry Management T-shirt, came up to me and asked if I was a podiatrist. Yes, I answered only to discover that she herself was a podiatrist!

The point was clear. Even though I'm no longer in practice, everybody in the club knows I'm a podiatrist. She's in practice nearby yet virtually nobody knows she's in practice.

Your local involvement in the community is one of the best ways to ethically promote your practice. For example, you should have your hair cut at a local salon. Don't be shy. Be sure to mention that you're a local podiatrist. Barbers and hairstylists love to talk and listen to clients. Sooner or later a customer will complain of foot pain. Voila! Your name will be mentioned, but only if you've laid the foundation beforehand.

Wherever you go and whatever you do affords you the opportunity to let people know what you do for a living.

Whether it's making reservations at a local restaurant, buying shoes at a local shoe store or picking up a prescription at your local pharmacy, don't pass up these excellent chances for exposure. Of course, you should always carry business cards. It's very awkward not to have one when asked.

Personal Appearances

You can't expect to wait patiently in your office for patients to find

you. It's up to you to do the necessary legwork to get your name known. Public speaking is an effective way to interface within the local community and to hone your public information skills for more sophisticated forays into radio and television.

Call up every civic association in your area and offer to give a foot related presentation. Some groups that regularly feature speakers are the Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis, Lion's Club, Knights of Columbus, Knights of Pythias, Optimist International and other similar organizations. The APMA and other organizations have prepared materials including slide presentations to assist you.

You can even go one step more. APMA Trustee Bruce Saferin is involved with the Kiwanis Club of Downtown Toledo, Ohio and has even served as its president.

Senior citizen centers are ideal locations to promote podiatry (and your practice). Try lecturing on geriatric foot problems and bring along some patient samples of emollients to hand out along with appropriate literature.

Media Events

A media event can range from the opening of a new office to a charitable drive such as collecting shoes or socks for the homeless. You can even tie your event to another event.

In 1984, I coordinated an event tied to the New York Marathon. I prepared a media kit outlining ways to treat the inevitable soreness that most marathoners experience the day after running over 26 miles. My office even offered free treatment for any marathoner. This package was sent to approximately 50 TV and radio stations.

Typical of most media promotions, most of these kits wound up in the circular file. Imagine my surprise when while watching ABC News the night before, Spencer Christian (The reporter assigned to covering the marathon) discussed my tips and encouraged runners to visit my office on Monday AM!

It is beyond the scope of this article to describe all the steps involved in planning a successful media event, so we'll discuss that topic in a future article.

Don't Forget Your Staff

It's usually very difficult to promote yourself without sounding

egotistical. Not so with your staff. They should be your number one backers. To do this effectively, you've got to motivate and arm them.

Motivation comes from paying them a good salary to work and by rewarding them for their efforts. Office morale is very important and each member of your staff should feel that they are part of a "winning team" and that by promoting you and the office they will benefit.

Beyond providing an adequate monetary and benefits package, you should consider an incentive program to reward employees for referring new patients. It's better to provide some form of gift, such as theatre tickets or a luncheon than to give cash. The last thing you want is a "kickback" or "fee splitting" problem.

Another "reward" is take staff members to educational meetings and seminars. This is a "win-win" situation because the office benefits by the increased skill and knowledge of your staff. Your staff gets a day or two out of the office and maybe even a trip out of state.

Be sure to make up business cards for all staff members. These serve to enhance the employee's self esteem while providing inexpensive advertisements for you.

Some Concluding Thoughts

We've given you some ideas and techniques for putting forth an effective public relations campaign. It's important to realize that the realm of different things you can do is only limited by your imagination.

The key elements remain planning, coordination and attention to detail. This ranges from coordinating the color of your stationery to making sure you have provided enough food for the media when you hold an event. Remember everything you do reflects on your professionalism.

Maintaining a public relations profile is important both for your personal success as well as that of the profession. The APMA and your state component association or society has only a limited amount of funds allotted to PR. Because we are such a small profession, we need a real grassroots effort by every podiatrist to get the word out as to the benefits of seeing a DPM for any foot or ankle related problem.

Your public relations campaign will indirectly benefit other DPM's and in the same manner you will benefit from their campaigns.