

Eight budget-friendly ways to market your practice during COVID-19

By Lisa A. Eramo, MA

Today's physicians have a lot on their plates, and marketing the practice may not be at the top of their priority list. However, experts say this is the ideal time to connect with new and existing patients, serve as a resource, and explain how to access care.

Why is marketing the practice—particularly during COVID-19—important? It's absolutely essential for patient retention, says **Stewart Gandolf, MBA**, CEO and creative director of Healthcare Success, a full-service healthcare marketing and advertising agency. "Doctors by and large over-estimate the loyalty of their patients," says Gandolf. "Competition is accelerating with leaps and bounds."

Independent practices not only compete with hospital-owned practices, urgent care centers, virtual care providers, and pharmacy-based walk-in clinics—all of which have large marketing budgets, says Gandolf. During COVID-19, patients may be more willing to switch providers if they perceive that those other entities provide safer and more efficient care, he adds.

Marketing also can help physicians attract new patients, says **David Zetter**, CHBC, founder and president of Zetter HealthCare, LLC, a full-service practice management consulting firm. However, before investing in marketing efforts, they need to ask this important question: Are there enough providers and medical assistants to handle an increase in patient volume? "I wouldn't be marketing if you don't have your act together," he adds.

If physicians want to attract and retain patients, there are several budget-friendly ways to market their practice. Experts provide these eight tips to consider:

1. Invest in search advertising.

Search advertising (e.g., a Google ad) is a text-based ad that appears at the top of search engine results when a user searches for relevant terms (e.g., internist near me). The service uses a pay-per-click model, and physicians can expect to pay approximately \$3 per click for a Google ad, says **Rachael Sauceman**, head of strategic initiatives and internet marketing at Full Media, a healthcare digital marketing company. Cost per click is determined largely by the keywords used in the ad, she explains. The more competitive the keywords, the more expensive the ad.

"In our experience, searching advertising is the best lead generation tool," says Sauceman. "We don't recommend other types of advertising unless they have done this first."

Unlike expensive newspaper, radio, or TV ads, Google ads are cost effective and agile, enabling physicians to easily update their message, says Sauceman. For example, did the practice adjust its hours to accommodate patients who are symptomatic for COVID-19? Has the practice taken any additional precautions to keep patients safe? Physicians can update a Google ad in seconds to include this new information.

Search advertising is also all about timing. “If you get in front of patients on social media or the newspaper, you might get in front of a lot of people, but they’re not looking for a provider necessarily right at that time,” says Sauceman. “With Google, they are. If you get in front of them at that critical decision-making time, then you have the ability to influence that decision.”

2. Update the practice website.

Over-explain the in-office and virtual care experiences, says Sauceman. “It’s easy to forget the amount of confusion that’s out there and the fact that every practice is doing things a little differently,” she adds. She suggests including a step-by-step explanation of what patients can expect upon arrival to the practice or when they check in for a telehealth appointment, how they’ll interact with physicians and staff, and what happens after the appointment.

Consider devoting a section of the website to COVID-19-related education, says Zetter. “There’s a lot of bogus information out there,” he adds. “What can you do to un-muddy the waters? What are you going to do so your patients see you as the expert on their care and well-being? You want people to trust you and rely on you for information.”

Another idea is to provide a section devoted to financial resources, says Sauceman. Examples include links to patient assistance programs, a transparent list of costs for common services, or the contact information for the practice’s billing staff so they can answer questions and clarify invoices.

If possible, try to obtain backlinks from other reputable sites because this helps with search engine optimization, says Gandolf. For example, if a physician typically donates to a local Little League team, is the team willing to include a link to the practice’s website on its own site?

Most importantly, explain why the office is a safe place during COVID-19. For example, post pictures of staff wearing personal protective equipment, hand sanitizer stations, or the Plexiglas-protected front desk. Also include a bullet point list of what the practice does to ensure a clean environment (e.g., we thoroughly clean exam rooms after each patient or our medical assistants put a sign on each waiting room chair immediately after they call someone for their appointment so front desk staff know to clean the chair before another patient sits in it).

Physicians can also create a free YouTube video that details what the practice is doing to keep patients safe and then embed that video on their website, says Gandolf. “It doesn’t need to be fantastic production quality,” he adds. “It’s about reassuring patients that it’s safe to come in.”

3. Sign up for a Google analytics account.

This free service integrates with most websites and provides physicians with insight into total views, page views, and more, says Sauceman. It can also track contact forms or appointment requests made through the practice’s website back to a specific ad or other source. This helps physicians understand whether their marketing efforts are paying off. For example, if they placed a paid ad on social media, they could monitor whether that ad has successfully led patients to schedule an appointment.

Linking Google analytics to a practice website is easy. Most websites simply require users to input their unique Google analytics identifier code—a number that can be obtained under the admin settings of the Google account. The rest happens automatically behind the scenes.

4. Update your [Google My Business](#) listing.

Google My Business is a free tool that enables physicians to promote their business profile and website on Google search and maps. Physicians must [verify their business](#) before they can make changes to their listing. [Stewart: Why is it important for physicians to update this listing?]

5. Use secure texting.

For example, practices can text preventive health reminders (e.g., call to schedule your physical or don't forget to come in for your flu shot), appointment reminders, marketing of new services, and other health tips, says Zetter. “There are all kinds of things you can do to keep your name in the forefront of patients' minds,” he says.

6. Offer in-demand services.

For example, flu shots and COVID-19 tests aren't big revenue generators, but they're ways to introduce physicians to new patients, says Gandolf. Telemedicine is another example. Patients want this service, and practices that don't offer it will be largely overlooked, he adds.

7. Leverage social media.

“Several new patients have told us that they followed us on social media for months before joining the practice,” says **Travis Withers**, office manager at Essence of Wellness Clinic, a direct primary care medical practice in Chattanooga, Tennessee. [Travis: What kinds of things do you post on social media?]

8. Think outside the box.

Over the last few months, one of the physicians at Essence of Wellness Clinic has given Zoom talks to various organizations about the benefits of a plant-based diet. This has helped raise awareness of the practice and attract new patients, says Withers. [Travis: What specific organizations? Can you give a few examples?]

Marketing doesn't need to be an expensive or time-consuming venture. If anything, a little effort goes a long way and can actually help practices weather the storm of uncertainty during COVID-19 and beyond, says Sauceman.