

Pg. 14
New regulations, new
healthcare challenges

Pg. 16
Reality TV
and 'real' PR

Pg. 24
Women's health:
changing the conversation

O'Dwyer's

Communications & new media

Oct. 2010 | Vol. 24 No. 10

THE HEALTHCARE ISSUE

UNDERSTANDING THE FDA'S
CRACKDOWN ON PG. 10
HEALTHCARE ADVERTISING

CONSERVATIVE GROUPS FORM
TO CHALLENGE AARP PG. 30

PG. 12 THE POLITICS OF
PREVENTION CULTURE

HEALTHCARE GOES TO HOLLYWOOD:
CELEBRITY RX BRANDING PG. 19

October 2010 | www.odwyerpr.com

O'DWYER'S RANKINGS OF TOP
HEALTHCARE PR FIRMS PG. 49

Urgent care for physician marketing

Healthcare has not proved to be immune to the recession. Many consumers are now deferring voluntary procedures, diminishing physician and hospital revenues. Consumers demonstrate increased price sensitivity and uncertainty generated by healthcare reform. The Stark Law continues to restrict hospitals' ability to promote physicians, just as the pressures of consumer-driven healthcare mount. As a result, private physician practices are facing a new business reality, and many physicians are recognizing the need for greater visibility for themselves and their practices.

By Victoria L. Steiner

As consumers assume more responsibility for their own healthcare and increasingly turn to the internet to research doctors' rankings and hospital costs, it becomes crucial for medical providers to take charge of their image and reputation, and use the full range of communications tools to build consumer awareness.

To set themselves apart from the competition, business-savvy physicians are embracing public relations as a marketing tool. To maintain and grow their practices, medical professionals utilize PR to

position themselves as leading authorities in the field and to gain exposure through positive media coverage.

But how does representing a physician differ from other areas of public relations?

Media side effects

Our society glamorizes doctors. "Dr. Oz" and "The Doctors Show" have established a celebrity status for physicians and while such recognition can be flattering, consumers' obsession with "House" and "Nip/Tuck" raises anxiety for doctors in the real world.

As a healthcare communicator, it's

important to explain your physician clients that popular culture has positive side effects and helps raise consumer awareness about the complexity of medical work. Hollywood and the media have also reinforced the concept of a physician expert. Historically, consumers and media have used hospitals as primary medical information resources but now is the time to separate private practices from their affiliated hospitals to position individual physicians as independent expert sources rather than spokespeople for a health system. Among the tools available to use in promoting physicians are:

By-lined articles for local and community newspapers as well as trade publications.

Tip sheets for local media and newswire services.

Journalistic introductions with reporters covering health, science, and lifestyle stories.



Victoria L. Steiner

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Discuss the prognosis

A physician will not normally become an overnight media sensation. Working with outcome driven physicians, PR professionals must manage expectations before launching a campaign. It is important to stress that the benefits of medical PR are cumulative. Similar to PR for professional services firms, expert positioning will be instrumental in building long term visibility and will require continual message reinforcement.

Just as doctors rely on their patients to follow the treatment plan, PR professionals need to be able to collaborate with physicians to determine their target media, relevant medical conferences, clinical data and research, and patient testimonials that can support story angles.

Find a healthy communications style

After many years of school and practice, physicians have accumulated a lot of knowledge and experience. As they are trying to sharing their expertise, they can sound overly technical, use too much jargon, or simply be intimidating. Physicians often need to be coached to speak concisely and use accessible language. Remember to develop consumer friendly messaging and consider media training to help your physician clients practice interview techniques. Suggest a professional blog where they can share more technical content and expand on the topic discussed in the press.

Becoming a social butterfly

Technology is one of the main driving forces behind medical advances. Physicians are early adopters who utilize technology in their daily personal and professional lives. Help them recognize the marketing value of technology and put it to work for their practices. Social media present great opportunities for physicians to provide patient education to build relationships with their existing patients and recruit potential clients. Consider the following tactics:

Webcast surgeries and procedures.

Tweet to promote presentations and events.

Facebook about health tips and health-care reform news.

YouTube patient testimonials.

Get a second opinion.

Practicing medicine in the new more consumer-driven world of online marketing, physicians face the challenge of managing their reputation on review sites such as Yelp. The consumer demand for peer reviews of physicians and hospitals is only going to grow, which requires physicians to develop a strategy to maintain

and build their positive image online and across social media platforms. To do this, PR professionals should:

Keep physician client online profiles updated.

Monitor online review sites and assist physician in responding when appropriate.

Invite trusted patients to provide their feedback online.

Upgrade the website to provide controlled messaging and select testimonials.

With hospitals focusing every market-

ing dollar on promoting their organization, this is the time for physicians to establish healthy PR habits and use communications to position themselves for growth.

Victoria Steiner is Director of Client Services and Media Strategy at Harden Communications Partners. Her experience includes communications work for NASA, California Pacific Medical Center, UCSF, John Muir Health, Bellevue Medical Center, The Stone Clinic and several private physician practices in San Francisco Bay Area. ●

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Princeton Corporate Center • 5 Independence Way • Suite 300
Princeton, New Jersey 08540 • 609.514.5117