

Marketing: It Can Be Simple and Inexpensive

Jim McCormack, of Marketplace Communications in Chicago, said, "Every type of entrepreneurial enterprise requires marketing. There are no exceptions. It is not possible to succeed without marketing. It may be true that you will not need advertising. But you will require marketing. A word-of-mouth campaign is marketing. So are business cards. Your location. And even the clothes you wear. Every component that helps you sell your business is marketing. No item is too insignificant to be included."

SELLING THE SERVICE

Three types of items can be marketed: a service, a person, and a product. The product that the aquatic therapy practitioner sells is obviously a service. Here are some ways to sell your service...

Competition

First, you must know your competition. Competition should be analyzed. Find out what other services are in the area, what they are doing, how they are doing it, what their differential advantage is, who their referral source is, what their pricing and billing is, how they promote themselves, and what their facility is like. Evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. If the competition has well-known shoulder rehab program, it is best to find a separate niche or program that will service another group.

It is important to know what the competition is doing and to borrow the good things. It is not necessary to outspend competition, but it is important to outthink them. Developing programs that competitors have without understanding the potential demand in the market can lead to failure.

Next, you must know what makes your service different from the competitions.

Differential Advantage

Practitioners should find the program's differential advantage and publicize that difference. What is it that sets this service apart from the rest? This difference will keep the service and its advertising from looking like every other one.

A differential advantage can be equipment, one-on one therapy, or groups with group enthusiasm. It can be the type of facility, the payment choices, the length of the program, or the unusual features of the program. All practitioners should be able to find their differential advantage when reviewing their service. Find the niche that's special to you, and market it.

Now we're ready to market!

Free and Inexpensive Promotion Ideas

During a promotion, the practitioner has an opportunity to boost business. To capitalize on the situation, a promotion should do one or more of the following:

1. Show that the service is of high quality.
2. Invite potential patients or referral sources into the facility to experience the program.
3. Let doctors and patients know that the program meets the criteria of the latest advances and trends in the industry.
4. Show that the clinic is involved in community service.
5. Increase exposure and visibility.

Newsletters

Practitioner's can write a one-page newsletter with a brief article on the benefits of the service. Include some success stories. Add photos if you can. Distribute it free to local doctors and other contacts. Email it to patients and encourage them to pass it on through email and hard copies.

Newsletters don't have to come out regularly - just when you (or one of your patients or co-workers) have time to collect information and put it together.

Media Rapport

Get to know the health section editors of local newspapers. Act as a consultant, write articles, send press releases, and get on television. A local media representative can be an invaluable resource in an advertising program.

Have a media tour or pool party where media representatives are able to see the facility and experience what happens during therapy. Ask the media for tours of their facilities to better understand what happens when they work.

Develop and regularly update a media mailing or emailing list to be sure releases are reaching the right people. Check frequently to make sure contacts are still working at the facility. Call or email and ask if there's anything you can do for them.

Postcards

Before patients leave your site have them write thank you postcards to their referring MD (you can give them the words to write) and you send them out. This will increase your referrals dramatically.

Stickers

Have stickers printed with the service logo, name, address, and phone number on them. Attach them to everything. Give them to patients. If you're on a budget buy blank stickers (in a fun size, shape, or color) at an office supply store and print them from your computer.

Athletic Teams

Have coaches bring their teams in to be taken through a sample rehab or conditioning program. Spend a half-hour doing some of their traditional land drills in your pool to let them see the challenge of water. Then have them try a sample shoulder, hip or knee rehab session.

Telethons

Work with a pool or spa dealer and have him/her bring a spa onto the set of a local telethon. Fill it with water and demonstrate therapeutic technique. Be sure to emphasize that hair stays dry and the face is not in the water.

Health Fairs

Participate in a local health fair or health show. Pass out free information on the benefits of water therapy. Use photos as much as possible. Try to get a free booth or share one with someone who has the same market but doesn't offer the same service (health food store, swim apparel store, etc).

Human Interest Stories

Frequently send articles to newspapers about interesting events. Newspapers want human interest stories, not dry stories about companies or new services. For instance, if someone in the program is celebrating an eightieth birthday, the media should come to the pool celebration so the participant can say how wonderful aquatic therapy has been. These stories can be about staff or patients. Just dig a bit - everyone has a story.

Educational Seminars

Host educational seminars that bring medical or aquatic professionals from out of town. This will enhance credibility. Ask people to speak for free if you pay mileage - it'll be good exposure for them and excellent marketing for you.

You know what topics your market is interested in. If you're marketing to the doctors for referrals keep the seminars short (20 - 30 minutes) and give them a reason to come (85% pain reduction without drugs). Hot topics might be Hips, Knees, Shoulders, Back, Chronic Pain, Pediatrics, etc.

Press Release Facility Changes

Send press releases of changes in facility, staff, or services. Even if a new PT is hired for only two hours a week, a press release, (giving information about him or her and his/her education) and a photo should be sent to the newspaper.

Many times the release will not be printed, but the ones that are will be effective free publicity. Sometimes the photo will be published with a caption - that's better than getting the entire release in. People actually look at photos!

Send the articles and photos to small weekly newspapers and large daily ones, as well as to trade magazines. In local communities, there are often small private publications that will publish the information.

Write short releases every time someone attends an educational seminar, when they become certified in a new technique, when you buy new equipment, etc. It's free publicity if it gets printed and it draws attention to your facility.

Public Speeches

After attending an aquatics convention or reading an aquatics book, the therapist/practitioner can share knowledge with others in the community. Line up speaking engagements with the Kiwanis, the Rotarians, the Women's Club, the Junior Women's Club, the League of Women Voters, hospital organizations and in-services. There are many things you (or a colleague who likes to speak in front of others) know that others don't. It could be the latest techniques you're using for FMS, MS, ADD/ADHD, CVA, etc. Keep the talk short (20 minutes) and educational - they don't want a sales pitch.

Magazine Articles for Patient Education

The idea of writing an article scares many therapists, but they should be aware that it is not necessary to be a good writer to get articles published in local magazines, newspapers, and trade magazines. Editors will generally revise the piece for correct language and style.

Magazines and newspapers often print educational information because people are always looking for it (and the publication needs filler). Articles carry a great deal of weight and credibility with readers. Small local magazines and health associations within the community may be especially willing to print the information. All articles should be accompanied with photos.

Prior to submitting articles, become familiar with the types of stories local newspapers and magazines publish. Furnish them with appropriate information. The article should be timely (about something current), of local interest, and include human interest or informational news.

After an article is published, it should be copied and sent out to doctors to give to their patients. The patient education done through articles will educate the public and let them know what to look for in a credible, high-quality program.

Articles will get far more exposure than any type of advertising.

WHAT TO PROMOTE

Marketing strategies should address the seven things that doctors/patients look for when making a choice:

1. convenience or comfort
2. love, friendship, and socialization
3. security and safety
4. social approval and/or status
5. life, health, and well-being
6. profit, savings, or economy
7. stylishness

These seven factors should always be considered when creating and marketing an aquatic therapy program. Doctors usually want convenience and they want to look good (security that you will do a good job that reflects on them) - if you can do that for them the referrals will be abundant.

You don't need to buy expensive ads to accomplish your marketing goals. Try a couple of these ideas and enjoy your success.

Taken from [AQUATICS The Complete Reference Guide for Aquatic Fitness Professionals and Painless Strategic Planning](#) by Ruth Sova. Available through www.aqua-gear.com.