

PHYSICIANS PRACTICE[®]

Giving
your
practice a

 **CHECKUP**

by Neil Baum, M.D.

N *one of us need to be reminded that the medical landscape has changed.*

We do know that more people will be seeking health care, and the delivery of health care will be far different than it was just a few decades ago. This flood of new patients will affect nearly every medical practice partly because we need to increase the number of physicians to care for them. We need help to retain employees who are leaving the health care sector. In the meantime, what can you do to ensure the continued success of our practice? This four-part series focuses on four key areas or the “four pillars”:

1. Keep existing patients happy. **PAGE 3**
2. Attract new patients. **PAGE 6**
3. Nurture relationships with your medical colleagues and other health care providers, such as physician assistants and nurse practitioners. **PAGE 9**
4. Maintain the morale of your staff. **PAGE 12**

I would like you to think of the four pillars as legs on a table. All the legs are necessary to maintain the stability of the table. If you remove one leg, the table is unstable. No leg/pillar is more important than the others; all four are necessary to guarantee a successful practice.

Keep existing patients happy

In this first blog, I explain why it is vital to ensure that every patient has a positive experience with your practice. This begins the moment they make their first telephone call for an appointment, through their time spent in the reception area, to the moment they are seen by the staff or the physician, and beyond — when they tell others about their stellar experience.

Getting new patients is nice but keeping the ones you already have is more important. In most professions and businesses, keeping an established customer is one-fifth the cost of acquiring a new one. Medical practices are no exception. If you need to do an excellent job with the patients you already have, spending thousands of dollars on a marketing plan to bring in new patients is a waste of your money. The patients you have right now are the backbone of your practice.

Give your practice a **checkup**

Today, knowing the needs and expectations of your patients and referring physicians is critical. Just as you recommend that your patients receive a regular examination, you should consider regular a checkup on your practice. The best way to do this is to ask your patients what they think, which also will reveal your practice's strengths and weaknesses. This information can be obtained easily by surveying patients about various aspects of your practice. (Even closed practices should evaluate their services periodically and listen to their patients. Changes always occur, and the cup may not "runneth over" forever.)

Thomas J. Peters, the nationally renowned co-author of *In Search of Excellence*, has described two keys to success in business:

- Find out what the customer (patient) wants and give them more of it.
- Find out what the customer (patient) does not like and be sure to avoid it.

Techniques to gather the patient's perspective

There are five effective techniques for determining how patients perceive your practice and for evaluating your performance and reputation:

- Conduct personal interviews.
- Conduct patient surveys.
- Create a focus group.
- Use a suggestion box.
- Employ a mystery shopper.

I have used all five techniques. However, my favorite and most cost-effective involves a survey card given to every patient at every office visit (**Figure 1**). The card is given to the patient when they check in, and they

Figure 1.
Sample patient satisfaction survey questions

Thank you for helping us to serve you better!

Was it easy for you to get an appointment in this office?

No Yes

Is your general impression of this office favorable?

No Yes

Was the office staff friendly and concerned?

No Yes

Did the doctor adequately answer your questions?

No Yes

Would you recommend this office to someone else?

No Yes

Do you have any additional comments?

can complete it in the reception area or exam room and return it to the receptionist before leaving the practice. The cards are reviewed by a nurse, who addresses positive and negative comments. Most negative comments are handled with a phone call. If necessary, I respond to the patient’s complaint.

There is another benefit to the survey card. The reverse side of the card prompts the patient to write down three questions they would like you to address on their current visit to the office. Conducting the appointment according to these concerns can help keep patients from initiating a last-minute discussion that you did not address during the doctor-patient encounter, often after you have closed the chart or electronic medical record. Since my office has implemented this survey card, we seldom receive follow-up phone calls from patients about issues they should have discussed. The survey card demonstrates that we are listening to the patient and want to ensure that all their questions have been answered during their office visit.

Develop an on-time philosophy

You know the adage: Timeliness is next to godliness. (It’s cleanliness that’s next to godliness, but timeliness is vital, too.) Patients’ most common complaint about the health care experience is “waiting for the doctor.” Spending excessive time in the reception area accounts for more patient dissatisfaction than any other aspect of medical care. In one recent survey, nearly one in four patients (24%) claimed to have waited 30 minutes or longer. This statistic will only worsen with so many more women entering the marketplace.

To gain an accurate picture of what is happening regarding the schedule in your practice, I suggest conducting a “time and motion” study. For a period of 3 to 5 days, place a sheet on each patient’s record or superbill and log in the following:

- Time of appointment.
- Time patient arrived.
- Time patient left the office.
- How much time patient spent with physician.

You will be amazed to discover that patients are waiting 1 or 2 hours or longer to see the physician, and that the physician is spending only 5 minutes with the patient. Ask any patient on a survey if they feel they are getting a bang for their buck, and they will answer, “No!”

By conducting a time and motion study, you will discover that there are predictable periods when backlogs occur. Often these delays result from “working a patient in” to the schedule. Unscheduled patients who call to report a medical emergency are often told to come in without an appointment. Still, they inevitably displace patients already scheduled and delay the visit of those with scheduled appointments. This

problem affects almost every doctor.

One way to avoid this scenario is to create “sacred” time slots. These are 15-minute intervals at the end of the morning or afternoon in which unscheduled patients can be seen without affecting the schedule.

Instead of telling the patient to “just come in,” the receptionist tells them to report at a specific time. These time slots must be filled with something other than routine appointments. They can only be filled after 9 a.m. each day. This leaves two or three places open for patients who must be seen immediately.

Few physicians can change health care policy. But all of us can be more sensitive to our patients’ time and try to see them as soon as possible, eliminating one of patients’ most common complaints: the long wait to see their doctor.

Make the patient’s experience memorable

All of us who graduated from medical school can make a diagnosis and provide a treatment strategy for most patients’ medical problems. But how many of us can make the experience memorable for the patient? Often, simple things that can be easily and inexpensively implemented make a big difference.

Look at the patient and not the computer. Patients’ most common complaints about their experience is that the doctor was eyeball to eyeball with the computer instead of the patient. Make every effort to look at the patient and less at the computer screen. This can be easily accomplished by enlisting the service of a scribe.

Use cloth, not paper gowns. There is a sharp contrast between a paper sheet, a paper gown and a soft robe. You don’t step out of the shower in a fine hotel and put on a paper robe. If you are offering five-star service, you need to provide five-star amenities. If you want to attract special patients, treat your patients special.

Adding a few dozen robes to your office supplies costs less, laundering them after each use and placing them on hangers or in a plastic bag that each patient can use during their visit. I assure you that this idea will set you apart from most other physicians in your community.

Here is another idea: Use pads to cover the metal of the stirrups for the pelvic exam. Those stirrups are cold steel; no female patient wants to place her feet on those chilly structures. You can have lamb’s wool pads created by a seamstress for a few dollars — or if you prefer, go low-tech and use potholders to cover the stirrups.

My wife told me how uncomfortable it is to have a metal speculum inserted and how much she appreciated her doctor warming the instrument with tap water before its insertion. I have found that this saves on the use of lubricant jelly, too, because the water serves as a lubricant.

Most medical offices are kept at 70 to 72 degrees Fahrenheit to keep the doctor and staff comfortable. However, when a woman puts on her gown or robe, she often becomes cold and uncomfortable. When it is cold outside, or the office is cold, use an inexpensive heater to make the room comfortable for the patient.

You make points with your patients if you speak to them when they are fully dressed and your eyes are at the same level as the patient. A woman lying on her back in a gown or robe does not hear or recall what her doctor tells her. However, if the doctor and nurse leave the room and allow the patient to get dressed, and if the doctor sits with the patient without barriers between them, she is far more likely to listen and recall what has been discussed.

I am often asked for my “best” idea to keep patients happy. Take a few minutes to call the patient at home. Which patients should you call? Patients undergoing outpatient

studies or procedures, recently discharged from the hospital, and requiring a little more hand-holding and attention. You can be sure that every patient who undergoes a procedure or is discharged from the hospital has questions about the findings, any precautions, medications and follow-up instructions. A call from a nurse or doctor does a lot to allay their apprehension — and it often keeps the patient from calling the office with their questions and concerns. My nurse identifies and contacts key patients at the end of the workday. She can usually answer all the questions but may identify two or three that require my attention. She tells the patient what time I will call so she can keep the phone line free. Calling patients usually takes no more than 5 to 10 minutes a day and provides me with great satisfaction. Patients are generally surprised — and happy — that their physician is calling them at home.

The advantages of this strategy include:

- Fewer calls from your patients.
- More efficient use of your time.
- Deep appreciation by the patient.

One patient I called at home wrote me a note worth mentioning: “This is the first time a member of your profession has taken the time to call me at home and check on my condition. Undoubtedly, it will foster a better relationship between you and me.”

The bottom line

Word of mouth was the time-honored method of attracting new patients for thousands of years. That method still works today. Ensuring your patients have an outstanding experience during their visit is one of the best marketing strategies to promote your practice. Part two of this four-part series will discuss attracting new patients to your practice.



Generating new patients using social media

With this blog, I illustrate the value of having a social media presence and how to use social media to attract new patients. I used social media to promote my medical practice for five years. I can be found on the first page of Google search results for several medical conditions I treat and manage. As a result of these high search rankings, I have added two to four new patient visits every day.

You can achieve the same results using the techniques described in this blog. You

certainly can buy banner ads and create traffic to your page, but I want to show you how to get on the first page of Google using the natural, organic method.

Push versus pull marketing

There are two ways to share your information on the internet.

1. Push occurs when you initiate the process by placing your information before the website surfer. They get it or see it because of the actions you have taken. Sending emails is one way to push information to your target audience, or

potential patients to your practice. Another way to push your website and its contents is to get listed on the first page of search engine results (i.e., Google, Bing and DuckDuckGo). You want to “push” your website in plain view of the person who has typed in keywords or keyword phrases that relate to your practice (i.e., “gynecologist” plus “(your city),” “tubal ligation” plus “(your city),” or “loss of urine” plus “(your ZIP code).” Push techniques are the best way to market your services, and they offer the best return on your marketing investment.

2. Using social media, you can “pull” your audience of potential patients to your practice.

In other words, your target market of potential patients must type in your website address to come to you. The information or message you have on your social media sites must be strong enough and of sufficiently compelling interest that patients want to come to read what you have to say. Web surfers are looking for online relationships for information sharing. It is this interaction with your potential patients that makes social media unique. Using this pull technology, you can interact and develop a relationship with a patient before they pick up the phone to make an appointment and before they come to the office to see you in your brick-and-mortar facility.

Facebook and how it relates to your practice

Initially, Facebook was developed as a way for people to see what was going on in others' lives and a method to stay in contact. Initially, it was friends, family members or groups of like-minded individuals frequenting one another's Facebook pages.

Facebook has evolved. Today, companies, businesses and medical practices are trying to “pull” more website visitors to their Facebook pages. Large companies and large group practices like Mayo Clinic, Cleveland Clinic and MD Anderson Cancer Center have social media departments that post regularly, respond to comments left on their pages and answer questions posted by those who “like” their page or site.

Individual practicing clinicians and most smaller practices need

more money for a social media team. They also do not have the time or the training to write effective copy that is so compelling that web surfers are drawn or “pulled” to their Facebook page. However, your patients expect you to have a Facebook page, and they expect you to have quality information that is helpful and relevant to their well-being.

Can Facebook generate new patients? You can place a lot of information and pictures on Facebook; potential patients can leave comments or ask questions easily. You can start a dialogue with a patient without medical advice and motivate her to see that you provide medical value before establishing the doctor-patient relationship. A Facebook page can generate new patients if the information you post is current, credible and informative.

For instance, your practice is probably restricted to a few ZIP codes surrounding your office and hospital, which means you only want patients in your area to visit your practice's Facebook page because they are the only ones likely to call and make an appointment. Unless you are highly specialized in a particular field, the Facebook surfer from New York is not expected to come to your practice on the West Coast for medical care.

Competing with larger practices and hospitals with more dedicated staff to draw prospective patients to a practice through Facebook appears difficult or impossible. However, the real, overarching challenge is to improve your website rankings on the major search engines — to be on the first page of Google, Bing and Yahoo search results. And what we know is that

Google has placed a high value on website rankings through social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, if your Facebook page provides content that has keywords relevant to your target market and the content on your page links back to your website.

You will get more visitors to your website if it is found on the first page of search engine results because of your Facebook posts. Your website must be set up correctly for easy navigation and visitor conversion. In that case, you may need help to obtain the desired result of gaining new patients. You need a website with marketing and patient conversion systems built into it.

YouTube videos

YouTube has become a significant search engine for every product and service you offer. There are millions of videos on YouTube, and viewers can search simply by typing in any medical topic.

There are five ways your practice can benefit from a video posted on YouTube.

1. **Website traffic driver:** To achieve this “pull,” you must correctly label your posted video with keyword phrases relevant to the type of patient or conditions they are looking for and offer a description that would make a viewer want to see the video. You must provide a link to your website, increasing your chances of gaining a new patient.
2. **Boost your search engine optimization:** Google places a high-ranking factor on videos posted to YouTube that are keyword relevant.

3. A video library can position you as an expert:

You can create your own YouTube channel and keep adding videos. I have posted more than 70 medical videos on YouTube. If someone views one of these videos, they will have immediate access to the rest of the video collection, even though they may be labeled with other keywords. This positions you as a knowledgeable expert in your field.

4. Video embedding capability:

Any video posted to YouTube can be placed on your website in a format that keeps the viewer on your site. This means the viewer has less chance of getting distracted by other video offerings and landing on someone else's website.

5. Free video storage: Because you have stored the video on YouTube, you are not using the resources on your website when someone or several people view the video simultaneously.

Getting started with YouTube

A video can be a PowerPoint presentation. Studies have demonstrated that it is more about the content of the video than a physician being in front of a camera. You can use many websites to record a presentation; one of the most popular and easy to use is Zoom.

You can select a few frequently asked questions from your patients and record the answers. Look at what is new, relevant or controversial regarding the procedures you perform or new medications you prescribe. The ideal video length

is three to five minutes. It is my experience that it is hard to hold a viewer's attention for more than five minutes.

Using X (formerly known as Twitter) to attract new patients

The most amazing example of social media and building a fan base is X, formerly known as Twitter. Here is a question: Who are the people with the most extensive X following? The answer: celebrities, rock stars and athletes. As a society, we are obsessed with these groups and want to know their every thought, what they like, what they had for lunch.

How do you expect to build a base of website surfers who want to know your every thought on a medical condition? The harsh reality is if you think you will get new patients by making posts on X of 140 characters or less every day, you will be disappointed.

X is one of the top-accessed websites in the world. Linking your own content from such a website increases the connection to your practice of content when a potential patient performs a general Google search.

Use of TikTok

TikTok, a social media platform known for its short-form video content, has found an unexpected but valuable niche in the health care industry. Health care professionals and organizations increasingly use TikTok to educate, engage and connect with patients and the wider public.

One of the most significant advantages of TikTok in health care is its ability to simplify complex medical information. Doctors, nurses and health educators create informative and

entertaining videos on topics ranging from basic first aid to mental health advice. These videos educate and break down barriers, making health care information more accessible.

TikTok has an impressive user base, especially among younger demographics, making it a potent platform for health care professionals to disseminate information and engage in meaningful conversations about health-related issues. TikTok is about having fun, being creative and connecting with potential patients.

Is social media effective?

The effective use of social media can attract new patients to your practice daily. Regularly posting quality information is helpful to your existing patients and especially potential new patients. Social media can help you get new patients through search engine rankings. Even if you want to avoid doing any work on your social media sites, you can hire companies that will do it for you. Suppose you decide to outsource your social media efforts. In that case, I recommend that you work with a company with medical social media experience.

The bottom line

Today's patients are technologically sophisticated, and these social media techniques will continue to evolve. Stay caught up. Keep your competitors from dominating one of the most important sources of new patients you have, along with patient and physician referrals. Jump into this world of social media, and you will be richly rewarded. The social media train is leaving the station, and I hope I have shown you how to hitch a ride. See you online.



Obtaining and maintaining referrals from colleagues

Talks on medical marketing often begin with the three As of marketing: availability, affability and affordability. Physicians consider themselves available and likable and offer appropriately priced services. How do you differentiate yourself from the competition?

Just having a website, using fancy stationary, a slick three-color brochure or a practice logo will not do the trick. Let the truth be told: The last thing you need are brochures, expensive stationary or logos.

One of the biggest misconceptions about marketing is that to, do it well, you must spend lots of money to have an effective marketing strategy. Many steps are far more effective and essential to marketing than polishing your public relations image. The most essential element of your marketing plan is to make your practice user-friendly. Nowhere is this more important than in working with your colleagues who can refer patients to you. This blog will describe 10 techniques that any doctor can use to enhance their

relationships and their referrals with their referring physicians.

1. Writing an effective referral letter

The goal of obtaining referrals from your colleagues is to see that your name crosses the mind and the desk of the referring physician as frequently as possible, and positively. If you interview referring physicians, prompt communication is one of the most important reasons they refer. According to the *Annals of Family Medicine*, more than 50% of physicians state that effective communication is

Figure. Example letter template

(Date)
 (Name of doctor)
 (Address)

Dear (first name of doctor),

(Name of patient) was seen for a problem of (diagnosis).
 I recommended (drug). I plan to (plan of action).

I will keep in touch with you regarding (their) progress.

Sincerely,
 Neil Baum

For example, suppose Jane Doe is referred to you by Dr. Bill Smith. She has an overactive bladder and a cystocele. Her urinalysis is negative, you prescribe an anticholinergic agent and plan to see the patient in one month and do a symptom check and possibly a urodynamic study if she is not better.

Dear Bill,

Jane Doe was seen for an overactive bladder. I recommended (drug), 5 mg/day. I plan to obtain a urodynamic study and cystoscopy if she does not improve on the prescribed smooth muscle relaxants.

I will keep in touch with you regarding her progress.

Sincerely,
 Neil Baum

the reason that they select a doctor to send their patients.

Why do physicians refer to other colleagues?

- Return patient to primary care physician **100%**
- Medical skill **88%**
- Access to the practice and acceptance of insurance **55%**
- Previous experience with the specialist **59%**
- Quality of communication ... **53%**
- Board certification of specialist **33%**
- Medical school, residency .. **<10%**

The traditional referral letter is far too long; it is often two to three pages, arrives 10 to 14 days after the patient was seen and is very expensive, costing a practice \$12 to \$15 for each letter sent. The goal of an effective referral letter is that your note arrives before the patient returns to the referring physician.

The key ingredients of an effective referral letter include a diagnosis, medications you have prescribed for the patient and a treatment plan. The referring doctor is not interested in the nuances of your history or physical examination; they want the three ingredients listed above. Providing the referring doctor with the three ingredients can easily be accomplished using a boilerplate letter, as shown in the **Figure**.

Now, the letter can be faxed to the referring doctor often before the patient leaves the office, and you can be sure that the letter arrives before the patient calls the doctor with questions or concerns. As a result, you keep the referring physician informed and can function as the captain of the patient's health care ship.

Now, electronic medical records (EMRs) can fax the entire note to the referring physician. If you ask a referring physician whether they would like to read your complete note, you will find that the answer

is usually no. However, most EMRs will allow you to select fields that contain the diagnosis, the medications prescribed and the treatment plan.

2. Personally meet every physician who refers a patient

Try to meet all new physicians in your area. You should contact new physicians and tell them about your areas of interest or expertise.

3. Refer new patients to referring physicians

Don't have your referrals carved in stone and use the same colleagues. If a doctor is sending you patients, it is in your best interest to reverse refer when a patient needs a primary care doctor, endocrinologist or cardiologist. You can be sure these referring doctors will appreciate your referrals.

4. Create a lunch and learn program

You want other offices and medical staff to get to know your staff and what you do. There's no better way than to have a lunch and learn program in your office and extend an invitation to other offices in the area. At the program, have all the staff introduce themselves. Give them a tour of your office and even provide a three- to five-minute lecture on areas of your interest and expertise.

5. Recognize and acknowledge accomplishments

If one of your referring physicians has received an honor or an award, send them a congratulatory note. Also, if their children have accomplished an academic or athletic achievement, acknowledge it with a note. You can be sure it will be one of the only ones they receive, and they will appreciate

you taking the time to send them a personal note.

6. Share information with a no-meeting journal club

It is difficult to keep up with medical literature. It is challenging to keep up with the literature in your own specialty and articles appearing in other publications. One of the easiest ways to accomplish this is to copy articles that may interest your colleagues and target their reading by placing a Post-it note where you would like them to look so they don't have to read the entire article.

7. Share both non-medical and medical information

It is appreciated to share non-medical information with your colleagues and let them know you think of them even when you are not discussing patient care. For example, one of my colleagues collects fine pens. I saw an article about expensive pens made with diamonds and sent the story to my friend, suggesting that he might tell his wife what was on his wish list.

8. Keep the referring doctor in the medical loop

If you are caring for the patient and plan to discharge them, make sure you or someone in your office contacts the referring doctor and informs them that the patient is being discharged so they don't make unnecessary rounds on the patient. Other times to notify the referring doctor are when you admit their patient to the hospital, after surgery or a procedure or when you have a significant lab/path report.

9. Be user-friendly

Ensure that if you perform surgery on a referred patient, you dictate the discharge summary.

If the patient is to be discharged with medications, be sure you write those medications for the patient. It is also a nice convenience for the patient if they need to return to the referring doctor and arrange to visit both doctors on the same day.

10. Don't forget non-physician referral sources

Non-physician referrals include nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, pharmacists, pharmaceutical representatives, social workers, lawyers, beauticians and manicurists. Many of these non-physicians can send patients to primary care doctors and specialists.

11. Give gifts

This is the least likely method to attract referrals. If you send a basket of fruit and wine at holiday time, it will be one of many that the referring doctor will receive. Certain gifts will make you stand out from others at holiday time. A good example is a set of personalized luggage tags. The tags can be laminated with the doctor's last name on a red tag, making it easy to identify on the baggage claim carousel. Finally, I would suggest sending your gift at Thanksgiving instead of right before Christmas, as doctors are not as rushed during this time and are more likely to remember your gift.

Bottom line

Physicians can build a practice by word of mouth and do a great job caring for the patients, hoping they will tell others about their positive experiences. However, there are great opportunities to enhance the referring doctor relationship. Try a few of these ideas, and you will certainly see your referrals increase significantly.



Motivating your staff

The success of any medical practice and any marketing program begins and ends with the staff. I talked about four pillars of a successful practice, and staff motivation is one of the most important.

You can have new patients, excellent relationships with your referring physicians and many existing patients. If you have a staff who are excited, enthusiastic and knowledgeable when

answering the telephone and ensures that every patient has a positive experience with your practice, all your marketing efforts will be effective.

This final blog will review the importance of motivating employees by providing measurable and written goals through a concise, effective mission statement and policy manual. I will also review practical strategies for motivating employees by sharing the power, vision and rewards.

Creating a mission statement

Nearly every successful practice and every successful business have a well-defined vision, mission, goal or objective. The mission statement should spell out the purpose of the practice and the methods of achieving that purpose. It serves as the road map that provides direction to all members of the staff, doctors included.

Our mission statement is the following:

We are committed to:

- Excellence.
- Providing the best urologic health care for our patients.
- The persistent and consistent attention to the little details makes a big difference.

Policy manual

Every practice needs a manual that contains its rules and regulations. Ideally, this manual should also serve as a guide for any new or temporary employee who comes to work in the office. The manual should cover job descriptions, dress codes, hours of operation, the division of office responsibilities, vacation days, sick days and emergency telephone numbers. The employee manual was written several years ago and has been updated to include precautions about opening unrecognized emails, intolerance of sexual harassment and when personal social media is allowed.

We summarize our policy manual with this expectation:

Rule #1: The patient is always right.

Rule #2: If you think the patient is wrong, reread rule #1.

ALL OTHER POLICIES ARE NULL AND VOID.

The mission statement is posted in prominent places in the office to remind our patients and ourselves of our dedication to excellent service. The mission statement is placed in the reception area and most examination rooms. It is also placed prominently on the website and on a large banner in the employee lounge.

When a mistake or problem occurs, the first question we ask each other is, “Did we adhere to the mission statement and the policy statement?” Usually, we discover that we did not. We use the mission statement and the policy manual statement to refocus on our number one priority: our patients.

Figure 1. Worksheet for Employee Performance Review

1. What do you like most about working here?

2. What would you recommend improving?

_____ Working conditions

_____ Morale

_____ Teamwork

3. Where do you want to be professionally:

_____ Next quarter

_____ 6 months from now

_____ 1 year from now

4. What can I do to help you reach your goals?

5. What are you going to do to reach your goals?

6. Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

No-cost techniques to motivate staff

A well-motivated staff will create an effective team environment. Most enlightened businesses see that team management leads to increased output and productivity. Your employees want to be valued as human beings and individuals, not just as workers.

The more you include employees in running the office, the more invested they become in helping to improve it.

Performance review

Employees like to know where they stand and how they can improve performance on the job. Motivated staff members want feedback on their progress or even lack of progress. The best way to furnish this important feedback is with periodic performance reviews.

Meet with your employees on a scheduled basis every three to four months. Each employee should be given a worksheet to complete before the review (**Figure 1**).

I always end each performance review on a positive note. I tell the employees how valued they are and how much of an asset they are to the practice. Of course, these meetings should be documented in the employees’ files.

Encourage continuing education

Just as physicians need continuing medical education, your staff members require continuing motivational experiences. It is a favorable return on your investment to encourage your staff to participate in continuing education courses, and it is necessary to support their efforts financially. You should offer to pay

the fees when your employees take seminars and classes. I suggest that your employees take courses in computers, social media, marketing or anything else that will help the practice grow and prosper.

To make these educational experiences more effective, ask employees to share what they have learned with other staff members. This can be done at a staff meeting where the employee who attended a seminar or course shares the information with the rest of the staff by giving a brief review of what they learned and how it applies to the practice.

Empower your staff

Office management is very complicated. Few doctors have a thorough understanding of all the business aspects of a medical practice.

Most successful physicians have learned to delegate the responsibility of running the office. They have learned to empower their employees to take control and assume responsibility for their decisions and actions.

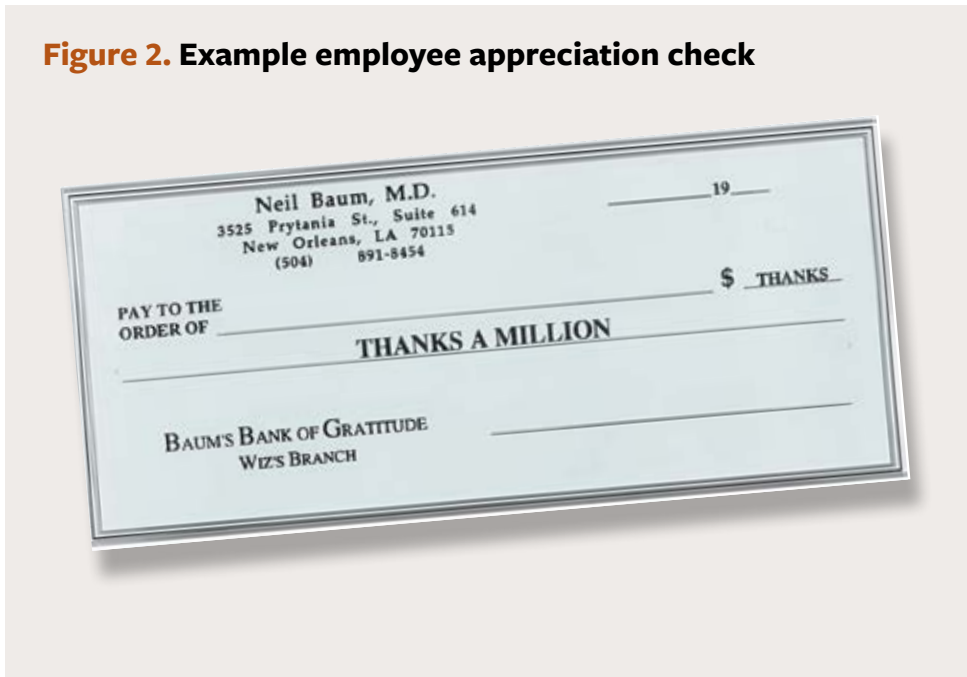
In my office, I empower any employee to make financial decisions up to \$200 without consulting me. For instance, if the office needs a new telephone answering machine, I want my employees to consider which feature we need, check the available ones and compare prices at the local electronic outlet, office supply stores and Amazon to find the best machine at the lowest price.

The take-home message is that more than ever before, physicians should do what we are best trained to do, i.e., diagnose and treat diseases. There are very few doctors who are experts on fax machines, and they should spend their time on things other than activities that their staff members should be doing.

Promote a positive mental attitude

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” This is also

Figure 2. Example employee appreciation check



true in the practice of medicine.

When you have a positive mental attitude, you motivate your employees by setting an example. On the other hand, if you are easily irritable and your problems at home are transferred to the staff, they will kick the can down the road and take it out on patients.

I have an attitude that employees are on stage. The moment they walk in the door in the morning, they must leave all other problems and concerns on the other side of the door.

They must have an attitude that they are responsible for ensuring each patient has a positive experience with the office at every contact point with the practice. That includes the telephone, the receptionist who welcomes the patient to the practice, the nurse who takes the patient into the examination room, the billing clerk who discusses the patient's bill and yes, the doctor too! My take-home message is that we all contribute to the patient's experience and we all must have a positive attitude.

Recognize achievement

Nothing is more motivating for an employee than for the doctor to recognize their achievements and accomplishments. When you see improvement in job performance, tell the person directly. You will be satisfying that employee's need for self-esteem. This improves the employee's confidence and helps them fulfill the need for self-esteem from fellow employees.

Show your staff that you care

Your employees need to know that you care about them not just as workers but as individuals with their own personal lives. When one of my employees or their family members are sick, I call them at home to check on them and ensure they have access to adequate medical care. If someone gets sick in the office, I will call another medical office and get the employee seen immediately.

Catch your staff doing things right

My philosophy is to praise in public and correct in private. When I catch

an employee doing something right, I send a thank-you note to the employee's home address, ensuring it arrives on a Saturday. Hopefully, the employee will show my note to family and friends. I use a check that reads "Thanks a million" to express my appreciation and gratitude (**Figure 2**). You will be amazed at how appreciative employees are that you not only recognized their superior service but also took the time to put it in writing.

Reward your staff for saving money or reducing overhead expenses

If one of your staff comes up with an idea that saves the practice money, give a bonus. For example, the 15-year-old autoclave in our office broke down. Our nurse took the autoclave to the hospital's biomedical engineering department, which installed a \$30 part that saved buying a new \$2,000 autoclave. She deserved to be rewarded for that, so I immediately gave her a \$50 check.

I am trying to motivate my staff to not just earn more money for the practice but to reduce expenses. They are paid for identifying and designing money-saving ideas.

Include your staff in the decision-making process

Ask your employees for advice. Then make sure that if you solicit their advice, you use it. Your staff members are on the front line, and they want the office routine to go well. You must include them in the decision-making process, including writing a mission statement or policy manual, determining a change in procedures, implementing an electronic medical record or meeting new job candidates. By including them, you are making them feel part of the team.

Finally, have fun with your staff

Surprise is the spice of life. Whenever you can provide an unexpected perk for your staff, you can be sure they will appreciate the gesture. For example, there was a week where we had two employees who were unable to work; one was on vacation, and the other was ill at home. We had to work harder to take up the slack for five days. Despite being short-handed, we were able to function at regular speed and capacity without affecting the quality of care we were providing our patients. I was so impressed with the extra effort of the shortfall that was taking place in the office that I arranged for a massage therapist to visit our practice at the end of the day on Friday and give everyone a 20-minute massage as a way of saying thank you.

Encouraging your staff to develop team spirit makes good business sense. When your employees have a personal investment in problem solving and decision-making, they will go the extra mile for your patients and for your practice.

This is the last of the four-part blog on practice promotion and productivity. I hope that you have identified the four pillars for your practice and that I have helped you to understand the importance of all four pillars as the strength and stability of a successful practice.

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