

Finding and Developing a Niche

One Audiologist Shares Her Experience of Starting and Growing a Private Practice

By Paula Schwartz, Au.D.



It is difficult to explain how a single-office private practice can grow over 24 percent each year and top \$1 million in gross sales over the course of four years. There is no silver bullet; rather it's a combination of preparing a good business plan and working the plan. This plan includes finding a unique niche; marketing the niche and not the products; treating patients as family; creating an awesome complementary staff and working with the primary care physician.

The Niche

Audiology Concepts in Edina Minn. added a secondary business – the Tinnitus and Hyperacusis Clinic– providing a business niche and marketing niche to complement our audiology practice. With a keen interest in tinnitus and knowing that few audiologists or otolaryngologists are interested in dealing with the distressed tinnitus patient, I knew this was an opportunity to offer a different and desperately needed service. We receive referrals from primary care physicians, neurologists, otolaryngologists and chiropractors, with some patients driving in from out of state for our services. Keeping tinnitus in the forefront of our marketing, particularly in the medical journals, has provided us opportunities to speak to the medical community about both audiology and tinnitus.

The Staff

Finding the right staff that shares the same values and work ethics is critical to the success of the practice. My office manager greets and treats our patients as she would her own parents. Patients feel welcome in our office and leave our office smiling. Patients have confidence that we are looking out for their financial best interest. My manager is very attentive to details including checking patients' coverage with their insurance companies. More importantly, we respect our patient's time and do not keep patients waiting.

We also have one person who serves as both audiological assistant and licensed dispenser. Utilizing the "assistant model," she is available to perform most non-revenue-generating activities, allowing me to focus on new patients, initial hearing aid fittings, reprogramming and troubleshooting. This type of support staff is invaluable in ensur-

ing that my time is maximized in revenue-generating activities. The "assistant model" also provides unlimited available time to the patient. This person will spend whatever time is necessary to ensure the patient learns how to put in an earmold!

The Market

We do not try to be everything to everyone. My original marketing plan involved only physician marketing in physician journals and image marketing directed at the Baby Boomers. Only once have I marketed a product (I regretted it the moment I did it). This marketing technique differentiates Audiology Concepts from all competitors running full-page newspaper ads and relentless direct-mailing campaigns. Our patients often comment that they appreciate the fact that we are not focused on one particular product, but a variety of products to ensure they have one best suited for them.

The Patient

Our goal is that every patient walks out of our office feeling that they were treated with respect, compassion and understanding. People don't get sold anything, instead they have professionals looking out for their best interest who are committed to working toward finding solutions best suited to their needs.

I spend a great deal of time educating patients on various options helping them make an informed decision based on their hearing loss, cosmetic preferences, lifestyle and budget. I am comfortable with patients leaving our office to "think about it." They receive so much information during their first appointment that we like to allow them extra time for processing everything. This time ensures that the patient returns to our clinic when they are ready to take action.

They are appreciative that they were not "sold" or pushed into making a decision.

I recently formed an Advisory Council consisting of 12 patients from all walks of life. We meet quarterly to discuss business ideas, marketing ideas and sometimes just for a good focus-group discussion. It is invaluable to hear what patients think and experience. We incorporate their ideas for improvement.

The Physician

Establishing a relationship and referral relationship with the primary care physician takes time but is absolutely worth it. Patients referred by their physicians walk into the office with a different level of confidence from those leads generated by a marketing event. Each report we write is a marketing opportunity with their physician. Physician newsletters, annual lunch and learns, "Physician Days" that provide free hearing testing for the physician, and marketing in the medical journals keeps our practice in the forefront of their minds and referral manuals. None of this is as important, however, than the report that their patient gives on their entire experience in our office. ■

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