



# PT *inmotion*

For members of the American Physical Therapy Association | Oct 2009

## Help Your Patients Make the Right Choices

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Clinical Research  
Redefined

16 Business Growth Tips

Introducing  
"Mystery Diagnosis"



# 16

## Tips to Help Your Business

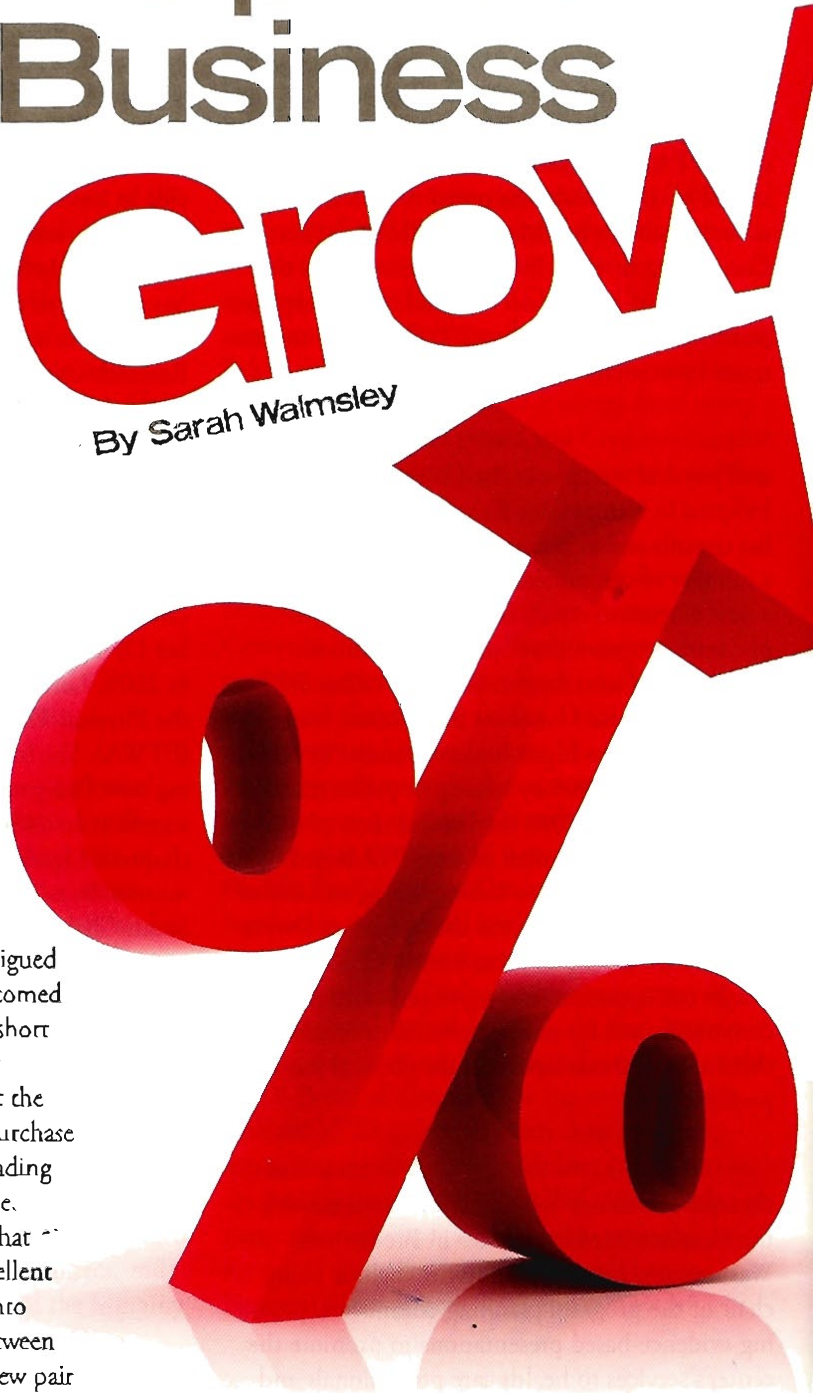
# Grow

By Sarah Walmsley

### The secret: Turn patients and physicians into fans

**Y**esterday as I was going through my mail I was intrigued by an envelope with a hand written address, a welcomed sight among bills and catalogs. I opened it. Inside was a short note from a local running store thanking me for my past patronage . . . and a \$25 gift card. It just so happens that the day before, during a long run, I decided it was time to purchase a new pair of running shoes. Today at lunch I will be heading to that very running store to put my gift card to good use.

I tell you this story not because I want you to know that I'm a sucker for saving money, but because this is an excellent example of a company that has put thought and effort into customer retention. There probably are 4 retail stores between my office and this particular store where I could buy a new pair of shoes. Several of those stores sell the shoes for less. However,



I will make the effort to get to this store because it made an effort to reach out to me. And more important for them, I'll regularly recommend the store to my friends.

Customer retention and marketing programs always have been the lifeblood of any business. But in these challenging economic times, good customer services can provide the boost that your physical therapy clinic may need to survive and even thrive. In the current climate, every business needs a differentiating factor. An effective marketing and customer service program makes an excellent distinction.

As you probably know, the cost to acquire a new patient in an average private, outpatient physical therapy clinic is about 50% more than the cost to gain a new patient via referral. It's pretty clear that turning current and past patients and referring physicians into referral sources is much more cost effective than acquiring new patients by other means. Remember that, even in direct access environments, patients often first go to their primary care physicians, who then refer the patients to PTs.

Marketing and customer retention programs don't have to be expensive. Further, the effort often produces big returns. The key, however, is to know your audiences and what makes them happy.

Outpatient physical therapy clinics often have two main referral target audiences: local physicians and patients both past and present. Consider each separately when developing an outreach program.

The secret to using these audiences to gain business is to turn them into fans. Good customer service is all about bringing your customers back and sending them away happy so that they will pass on positive feedback about your business. The essence of good customer retention and marketing programs is forming a meaningful relationship between your business and the customer.

Here are 16 things that you can do *right now* to turn your referring audiences—physicians and patients—into fans who will help your business grow.

## Increase Physician Referrals

**1** During your personal visits with referring physicians, give them useful promotional items that they are likely to use on a daily basis.

We have created notepads with treatment options pre-printed on them so the physicians need only to check off their orders instead of writing each one out every time.

This simple step may give a physician an extra 30 seconds in his or her day. That may not sound like much, but it's always appreciated. The branded pads also keep our company and its contact information readily available to the potential new patients.

**2** Whenever you receive a patient from a physician who has never before referred to your clinic, take a few moments to write a personal thank you letter and send it with a packet of information about your services.

**3** Collaborate with your top referring physicians when a media opportunity presents itself. If you're holding a grand opening event, invite them to attend and to offer their expertise to reporters for interviews. Even if they don't mention your clinic or physical therapy, keep in mind that when their business grows so does yours.

**4** Don't take your regularly referring physicians for granted. Continue to thank them for referrals even if they've already referred 150 patients to you. Handwritten cards from the clinic owner or

individual physical therapist are a great, quick, and inexpensive way to thank them for the continued business.

**5** Visit your referring physicians on a regular basis. Show them that you are taking time out of your day to visit their office and staff and that you personally are interested in their practices.

**6** Make personal visits to physicians who have never referred to your clinic before. Never underestimate the power of a face-to-face meeting to make an impression.

**7** Survey your referring physicians to find out what they want and their preferred forms of communication. Then abide by the feedback. Most physicians are willing to take 5-10 minutes out of their day to answer a quick e-mail survey if they know that they'll benefit. For example, if a particular physician lets you know that he or she prefers not to schedule office visits on Fridays, be sure to take note and respect his or her wishes.

**8** Create a "Welcome to the neighborhood" packet for new physicians that includes a letter from the local clinic or company owner, information on your services, and something unique, such as a reprint of an article written by one of your physical therapists or a DVD containing recent news coverage.

**9** Position your company as a source of information for physicians. Distribute a newsletter or e-newsletter with useful information about industry trends and topics. Offer anything they might find useful. Make sure that it's not just a commercial about your clinic.

**10** Deliver candy, flowers, apples, or whatever else is in season randomly to physicians' offices with a handwritten note thanking them for their business. This helps to build a personal relationship with the physician and also is a great way to move past the front desk, even in offices that typically discourage access.

## Turn Patients Into Fans

**1** Individual physical therapists or the practice owner should send handwritten notes to new patients thanking them for choosing your services. Add a personal note, such as your company's strength in addressing their particular injury.

**2** Give a gift certificate to a complementary business as part of the discharge process for all patients. When they use it they'll remember your thoughtful gesture.

**3** Shadow a patient during one of his or her physician's visits. This will not only show that you support the patient and are interested in all aspects of recovery, but also provide you "face time" with the physician. That is especially effective in physician's offices that otherwise would not allow you beyond the front desk.

**4** Create a 3-month callback program in which your facility's physical therapists personally contact discharged patients to check up on their recovery. This is particularly

effective for direct access patients who are more likely to return because they don't require a referral from a physician.

**5** Stay top-of-mind with past and present patients by contacting them at least once a year by mailing a birthday card. Most people greatly appreciate the sentiment.

**6** Hold free seminars open to the public in your clinic. Invite former patients with injuries related to the seminar topic. After the seminar, thank them for coming with a phone call or personal note.

Creating a comprehensive marketing and customer retention program doesn't have to be expensive or difficult. It just has to make your target audiences happy enough to recommend your services. Small, thoughtful acts can go a long way in effectively differentiating your business from the competition.

Just a few well-planned gestures will keep your business top-of-mind and your customers happy. Soon enough, they will become your biggest fans. **PT**



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