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In My Opinion

Consumer-to-Physician Referral Programs



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Health plan provider directories, recommendations from family or friends, marketing efforts to new movers, and physician-to-physician referrals are just some of the channels that funnel patients to your practice, but another means of acquiring new patients is through hospital-sponsored physician referral programs. These consistent and reliable methods can be found in some form in most hospitals and medical centers, but the scope of the program can vary greatly from one facility to the next. As consumers are becoming more involved in their healthcare decisions, consumer-to-physician referral programs are becoming increasingly important to gaining new patients to practices.

Hospitals with robust physician referral programs that integrate the telephone and internet, along with exceptional customer service, can have a significant bottom-line impact for physicians' practices. The call center managing the physician referral program can incorporate other features that enhance patient acquisition and retention, such as appointment scheduling and reminder calls.

6 "Must Haves" for Referral Programs

There are six features that all hospital-based physician referral programs should have:

1. Seamless integration of high touch and high tech. Consumers are accustomed to communicating at all hours and in the method most convenient for them. Over the phone or online, patients seeking a physician referral should be able to access the same comprehensive information. Many hospitals closely align the internet to the call center by giving consumers a "call-back" option in which a representative will contact the consumer at a requested time.

2. A fair rotation. Much more sophisticated algorithms are now available to overcome alphabetical issues; they allow for physicians' names to percolate to the top of the list on a rotating basis. It's important to ask how your preferred hospital allocates the referrals.

3. Extensive search parameters. The more closely a physician matches a caller's criteria, the higher the likelihood of a long-term relationship. Consumers want to search for physicians using any combination of specialty, insurance accepted, office hours, location, hospital affiliation, gender, and education. The more information physicians provide, the more likely a match.

4. "Warm" transfers and appointment setting. The most savvy call centers are able to actually transfer a caller to the physician's office or set an appointment themselves. Doing so increases the value of a physician referral program exponentially. It enables medical groups to see the number of referrals and measure the number of appointments made and kept.

5. Adequate marketing. Studies have shown that call center callers generate more in downstream revenues than those who don't make the call. There's value in marketing your practice through a physician referral service. Consider whether or not your hospital promotes referral services.

6. Around-the-clock access. Today's consumers don't operate on conventional schedules so they're requesting and, in some cases, demanding access to physician information they need at times that are most convenient for them.

You Can Make It Happen

Now more than ever, consumers are navigating the healthcare system themselves. It is your job to facilitate patient efforts to find you. Hospitals that couple today's technology with great customer service are better positioned to help their physicians acquire and retain a greater share of patients. If your hospital doesn't already have a comprehensive, well-communicated physician referral program, insist that they get one because staying connected is your key to success.