

DOCTORING UP THEIR IMAGE:

WHY ARE SO MANY PHYSICIANS IMPLEMENTING PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THEIR PRACTICES?

by Katherine M. Rothman

As recently as a decade ago, most physicians who had achieved a certain level of peer and patient recognition were loath to advertise their practices until HMO's began to dictate patient care and reimbursement. Soon after, sub-specialists such as gynecologists and internists were performing lucrative elective procedures that were once the sole domain of plastic surgeons and dermatologists. As the stakes in elective medicine were raised, even the most conservative plastic surgeons and dermatologists knew they had to change with the times or risk an empty waiting room. Advertising was the first phase in the evolution of practice promotion. Soon, savvy practitioners realized that advertising might only serve to maintain the status quo of a practice without taking it to the next level. Those cosmetic surgeons and dermatologists who sought an upper income, man or woman, began to feel that advertising did not impact their target patient. The reality is that those with disposable income for cosmetic procedures typically find their physicians through referrals or editorial coverage, not advertising. Enter public relations.

Public relations differs from advertising in that it uses editorial coverage in newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and health internet sites to highlight a physician and his/her practice. A campaign can focus on new trends, techniques, controversies, safety issues in a respective sub-specialty or any host of topics deemed press worthy by a publicist and media representative. Essentially, a PR campaign works by taking information the consumer needs and wants to know and pre-

senting it in the form of actual stories related to dermatology or plastic surgery. Ensuing media exposure in outlets such as Elle or Vogue magazine or programs like 'The Today Show' have a huge impact on prospective patients' medical choices. It serves to reinforce that a physician is the expert in his/her sub-specialty. In addition, it lends a cache of seal of approval that cannot be achieved even by an aggressive ad campaign. The bottom-line is that

PR!

medical advertising translates as biased, while it never occurs to the average person that a doctor employed a public relations firm to secure a media spot. Not only can public relations and sub-sequent media exposure increase name recognition, it can also translate into actual patients (increased revenue) as well as assure current patients that they made the right choice.

In dermatology, plastic surgery, ophthalmology, and now even holistic medicine, there are physicians whose names have become synonymous with a particular sub-specialty. Have these doctors re-invented the wheel or discovered the fountain of

youth to warrant such acclaim? The answer is no. Most have simply hired a skilled pr firm with solid media connections. Many doctors who would like to explore the prospect of engaging a pr firm mistakenly feel that if they are not located in big cities such as Los Angeles, Miami, New York, or Chicago that pr efforts will prove fruitless. This is quite the contrary. Those in the media want to have cross-section of cities from which to draw experts. In the same vein, some suburban doctors feel that prospective patients are intent on consulting only with urban doctors. While media resulting from public relations will probably not lure a city dweller to the suburbs, it can keep the suburban doctor's patient population in their own backyard, which is the biggest battle faced by suburban physicians. Media exposure can serve to assure the patient of receiving the same standard of care (outside of a city) while making them feel as if a "medical star" is in their own hometown.

Many cosmetic surgeons and dermatologists wonder why they simply cannot write their own press releases or have their office managers function in a dual capacity as pr pro. When doctors attempt this scenerio it often ends negatively or simply takes away from the doctor practicing medicine. Physicians must understand that the consumer media is not interested in the painstakingly technical depictions of techniques, as would be appropriate for a medical journal, nor are they interested in press releases that are entirely self promotional. The medical jargon must be translated and presented in a way that is palatable for lay people, and writers and

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The medical jargon must be translated and presented in a way that is palatable for lay people, and writers and producers are indeed lay people. Developing connections with the media is a full-time job. Only public relations firms have the time to solidify connections with the press and be recognized as a key source for medical/healthcare stories.

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Public relations, when implemented ethically and effectively, can truly help a practice gain an edge in competitive markets. It can often make the difference between remaining a 'best-kept secret' or having a full surgery schedule. Doctors who elect to go this route must keep their egos in check and adhere to the Hippocratic Oath. Is there a downside to public relations? Yes, physicians just might become addicted to their newfound fame.

About the writer: Katherine M. Rothman is the President and CEO of KMR Communications, Inc., a Manhattan public relations firm specializing in medicine. The firm's clients include leading plastic surgeons and dermatologists nationwide in addition to other sub-specialities of medicine. The firm's clients regularly appear in Vogue, Elle, Allure, and many other prestigious publications as well as national television programs. Ms. Rothman has addressed the topic of doctors and public relations in both trade and consumer media including: The Palm Beach Post, Physician's Financial News, HealthNewsDigest, and PR Health NewsWire. To reach Ms. Rothman call 212-527-7511 or email: KMRPR@yahoo.com

What Will A PR Firm Cost Me???

A local PR firm in a medium-sized town could cost you \$600 and up per month. If you want your name to pop up in local print now and then for dental and non-dental news, that could be a good way to go!

Katherine Rothman's national firm has a few dental clients as well and her company gets them featured locally **and nationally** for a fee of \$3,500 or more per month. Is it worth it? I'll let you know! More on this topic next month. In fact it'll be the cover story! (CSK)