

Marketing a Medical Practice in the Digital Age

Charlotte Healthcare Marketing Professional Shares Insight



LOU AMICO

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Company

With the Internet becoming one of the primary battlegrounds for recruiting new patients to cosmetic medical practices, marketers are working with an increasing number of these medical practices across the country to improve their online marketing. *Charlotte Medical News* spoke with Lou Amico, Charlotte-based owner of L.A.

Management Company, a marketing and video production firm whose clients include Metrolina Plastic Surgery and Piedmont Plastic Surgery and Dermatology. Amico graciously shared insight on changes in healthcare marketing over the past three decades.

Tell us about your first healthcare marketing job.

I began my career on Long Island managing a cosmetic medical practice in 1977, just as physicians were first allowed to advertise. At that time, this was ground breaking and controversial. Many physicians didn't believe you should advertise or market a practice to the public. There were traditional methods within the medical community to build a new practice and advertising was about to change the method and momentum that a physician could acquire new patients. Soon, new medical procedures and technology became commonplace and easily accessible to the general public.

Over the years, there have been bumps along the road, but in general the opportunity to market medical services has probably kept the cost of cosmetic and elective surgery more affordable and

available to a greater portion of the population because of their popularity and competition. Many physicians are able to specialize in a select area of medicine because they are able to market to patients specifically for their services.

How has healthcare marketing evolved?

With advertising, we were able to quickly establish ourselves in new markets and began opening up new offices in New York City, Boston, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

At first, we used print ads in the newspapers, yellow page ads and public relations. As time went on, we began to do radio and then cable TV. Eventually, cable TV and newspapers reached their ROI capacity and we moved on producing better quality TV commercials and even half-hour infomercials for broadcast television throughout the northeast.

We were very successful and developed a slick communication kit with glossy brochures and video tapes. All these new leads were entered into a database so we could track potential patients and send them personalized communications to keep them informed on new opportunities or services offered.

Eventually in the late 1990s, the Internet began to take off and we started developing Web sites and e-commerce sites where our clients and other customers from around the world could order cosmetic medical products.

How has the Internet changed the way you do business?

Today, I have my own home-based marketing company on Lake Norman, just outside of Charlotte. With the advent of broadband, the Internet became a much more powerful communication and resource tool. It's also a great pipeline for moving media

around the world. I no longer need to live near my clients and can send video or print projects digitally to clients, broadcast stations and newspapers. My clients can send me their information via email or via large file transfer Web sites. I perform Web site training and give presentations using GoToMyPC or GoToMeeting.com, where I can sit at my computer and walk a client in Seattle, Washington through a new Web site or PowerPoint presentation as if we were sitting side by side.

What are some of the marketing challenges and opportunities in the digital age?

I work with medical practices across the country and each one faces their own unique regional challenges. Marketing a cosmetic surgery practice in New York or San Francisco is very different from Charlotte, Austin or Milwaukee. Larger cities have more competition and more sophisticated marketing competitors; smaller markets may not have sufficient demographic numbers for some procedures and you have to reach outside of the local market.

Regardless of market size, the Internet is the new battleground. You can no longer advertise a new practice in the local newspaper and yellow pages and thrive. Newspaper and yellow page advertising are dying because they can't deliver a reasonable ROI. Radio and TV are usually too expensive for most practices and now with 300 cable stations and satellite radio, the market is too segmented to reach a broad enough audience without a very large cash outlay.

The other change is in the audience. Today, more and more people go to the Internet for medical information. It's an easy and quick way to find anything from a good local pizza place to a local plastic surgeon.

Now wait a minute ... did I say local? That's right, local. The Internet is becoming regionalized; Google realized this a few years ago when they started Google Local. The paid sponsored links you see on Google can be regionally targeted to a radius as small as five miles for a physician doing BOTOX to 100 miles for a plastic surgeon who does breast augmentation.

Even better, there are lots of free opportunities to position your Web site at the top of the search engines. Google Local is free and just requires you entering your practice information. Organic or natural listings (the free ones) can be achieved with good search engine optimization (SEO), which involves a complex set of tasks including building descriptive code into the pages of your Web site called (meta-tags), submitting your site to all the

search engines and free directories and building incoming links, beginning with getting listed on the Web sites of every medical organization you belong to and all those medical product sites that list "find a doctor" for (blank).

How do you incorporate these changes into your practice?

I work directly with physicians to develop a balanced marketing plan that will include Web site development, SEO, SEM (search engine marketing-the paid kind) and offline strategies like seminars, print, radio, TV or direct mail. We often partner with a local public relations firm to attract free media attention and to distribute press releases online that create valuable incoming links back to the doctor's Web site.

We also produce a lot of video specifically for the Internet. I'll get in my boat and travel across the lake to my partner's home, where we do all of our video production work. The videos may be promotional or informational. Once they're produced, we'll post them on the doctor's Web site and then distribute them through a distribution service to video Web sites including YouTube, Yahoo Video and many more. Often when doing a search for a specific procedure, you'll find videos listed in the organic searches if they're properly optimized. Once a video has been completed, my partner will send the videos through an online service that our Web developer who lives down the road from me can download and format the videos for the specific Web site video player.

The digital age has changed the way we market, but it hasn't changed the need for quality information that's reliable and true. Prospective patients are looking for good information so they can become comfortable with a physician, his/her practice and the services provided. When done properly, an elective surgical practice can thrive on the Internet with happy, informed patients who will then write glowing reviews about their experience so others can learn about the practice and the exceptional care and services provided.