

Running a successful surgical practice

IN a surgical practice, marketing, communication and the quality of staff can make the difference between success and just getting by.

Nigel Flowers, the managing director of Flowers Financial Group, says marketing and establishing an online presence have become increasingly important to maintaining a successful surgical practice in the past 10 years.



Nigel Flowers

Marketing directly to patients as well as to general practitioners and other stakeholders is a key part of building the business.

"Patients are now often telling their GPs which surgeon they want to be referred to", says Mr Flowers, whose company deals mainly with medical practices, particularly surgical practices.

Patients want to know more about the person who will operate on them and they are driving the demand for informative, professional websites, Mr Flowers says.

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But he warns surgeons not to try to do their own marketing, rather to outsource it to experts.

"The key thing is that with all the training to become a surgeon they do not get trained to be business people", says Mr Flowers.

Successful surgical practices know the importance of good communication with patients, staff, GPs, hospitals, anaesthetists and other stakeholders.

Two surgical practices that have made communication a big part of their business

are the Western Australian Plastic Surgery Centre (www.plasticsurgerycentre.com.au) in Perth and BrizBrain and Spine (www.brizbrain.com.au) a neurosurgery and spinal surgery practice in Brisbane.

Narelle Supanz, practice manager for the Western Australian Plastic Surgery Centre, says surgical practices have different dynamics to other types of practices.

Ms Supanz, who is also vice-president of the Australian Association of Practice Managers, says a surgical practice has to deal with a large number of stakeholders, including hospitals and anaesthetists, so good communication is vital.

At the centre, communication is facilitated through an informative website. Surgeons also provide medical education opportunities for GPs, nurses, hospitals, insurance companies, emergency departments and occupational health practitioners, particularly in the field of hand injuries, which is one of the practice's specialities.

The centre has nine surgeons and 24 staff, dealing with five teaching hospitals and 12 day surgeries and private hospitals.

At BrizBrain the excellent reputation of the neurosurgeons, developed through a high level of patient care and successful

outcomes, is used as a self-marketing model, says practice general manager Mark Higginbotham.

Both Ms Supanz and Mr Higginbotham emphasise that having the right staff and working environment for surgeons is essential to success. The two practice managers agree that it is important to let surgeons be surgeons by employing well trained and trustworthy staff to deal with all administrative matters.

Mr Flowers recommends finding people with experience in the health system if



Left to Right: Brigid Corrigan, Plastic Surgeon, Narelle Supanz, Practice Manager, and Rohan Page, Plastic Surgeon

possible. "Staff who deal well with patients are a priority but knowing how the health system works is important", he says.

Ms Supanz says the surgical model of practice means each surgeon has his or her own secretary, who must be trusted to not only manage patients and bookings, but also financial transactions.

"A surgeon usually develops a strong bond with their secretary and a good secretary can second guess what a surgeon wants", Ms Supanz says. "If the relationship doesn't work, then the practice will not flow well."

Mr Higginbotham says excellent working conditions are used to attract the right staff. Conditions include 5 weeks' annual leave, regular updates of the computer and phone systems, modern and well equipped offices, corporate uniforms, regular staff dinners and cultural events, and flexible working hours.

"The surgeons recognise how important staff are to the success of the practice", he says.

BrizBrain has five neurosurgeons and 17 staff across three sites in Brisbane, close to the hospitals where the surgeons operate. The surgeons also regularly consult in regional areas of south-east Queensland and northern NSW.

Ms Supanz emphasises the importance of all surgeons in the practice having a shared philosophy. For example, the Western Australian Plastic Surgery Centre does not agree with payment plans for cosmetic surgery.

“We don’t agree with that because it adds financial pressure for the patient”, she says.

Mr Higginbotham adds that having all the practice surgeons included in decision making about the growth of the practice is vital to success.

For example, at BrizBrain the surgeons do regular reviews of cases to ensure best practice and patient outcomes. The practice also offers opportunities for young neurosurgeons.

“Young, up-and-coming neurosurgeons have the chance to work with successful, experienced neurosurgeons, accelerating their professional development by being able to draw from the wealth of clinical and surgical experience”, Mr Higginbotham says.

Online billing

Although optimal patient care is the primary focus for all practices, financial and management issues can make or break a business.

Surgeons have been slow to take advantage of online billing systems, which can reduce costs and provide more secure financial records, Ms Supanz says.

In contrast to general practice, which has taken advantage of online billing, surgeons continue to maintain systems that could leave them vulnerable to fraud.

She says Medicare Australia’s ECLIPSE

(electronic claim lodgment and information processing service environment) system (<http://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au/provider/business/online/eclipse/index.jsp>) provides online claiming for both Medicare and private health funds as well as a detailed account of all payments to individual surgeons.

Some surgeons were lax in seeing the necessity to cross-balance payments received via the practice management software with what had actually been banked in their bank account, Ms Supanz says.

Online billing and linking practice and finance software creates a much clearer record of all transactions for individual surgeons.

“Surgical practices are still well behind in regards to methods of payment. From the patient’s perspective, electronic claiming provides an easy and convenient option”.

ECLIPSE allows patients to make payments and health fund claims at the practice, rather than having to make Medicare and health fund claims separately.

Practice finance

Young surgeons just finishing training need to think about planning, building and protecting their business “from day one”, Mr Flowers says.

Unlike several other branches of medicine that have been corporatised, surgeons still operate mainly as individual business



structures, and need to have a business plan in place early on.

A surgical practice should aim for expenses to equal 30% of turnover, which can be difficult when starting out.

He says the peak earning time for surgeons is usually between 35 and 50 years of age, when their skills are at their best. However, this is the same period when most people are raising a family and have a mortgage.

Mr Flowers says young surgeons should get good advice on the best ways to minimise their tax and invest in other areas to ensure they have financial security later in life, when they may no longer be able to operate and their income is not as high.

“Always plan for the worst”, he says. “Having the right structure in place that secures assets and provides for the future should be the aim.”

By Kath Ryan

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