

Practice Management

Public Relations in Urgent Care: A Step-by-Step Plan for Success

Urgent message: Getting local media attention can drive patients to an urgent care center's doors. Applying best PR practices can produce results and conserve marketing dollars.

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Despite the meteoric rise in urgent care center openings over the past decade, media outlets indicate that story pitches received from urgent care providers pale in comparison to those submitted by hospitals and pharmaceutical companies. Yet urgent care medicine remains fertile ground for quick and compelling medical stories sought by reporters each day. Harnessing those needs by submitting story ideas based on the services an urgent care center offers is one way that providers can propel their businesses forward in their own communities.

To do so, an urgent care provider must understand best practices for public relations initiatives and media outreach so that urgent care practices can be taken to the next level and avoid falling short of goals while wasting valuable marketing dollars. This article offers an inside view of what it takes to effectively communicate story ideas to reporters and the difference an ongoing public relations initiative has made to one group of urgent care clinics in Texas.

Introduction

Public relations (PR) is often viewed by business owners as "just another aspect" of marketing. Although

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the two disciplines often work hand-in-hand, they remain vastly different in approach and investment. Marketing's immediate goal is business profit, whereas the goal of PR is long-term relationship-building that can affect positive community perception and business positioning as well as solidify the expertise of business owner(s) in the community.

This article examines the effects of establishing a PR outreach program through one case study and identifies ways in which urgent care centers can best accomplish the often overwhelming task of media outreach, either internally or with an outside agency.

Case Study

Over the past 30 years, Texas MedClinic has expanded to support the San Antonio and Austin communities with 14 clinics strategically located throughout the two cities. In an effort to increase community visibility through media outreach, the previous marketing director decided to divert some of the clinic's marketing dollars to PR. Initially, the marketing director attempted PR efforts along with her ongoing marketing responsibilities. Quickly, she recognized that her skill-set did not include knowledge or previous work experience with local reporters and all the multi-tasking hampered her efforts.

She then hired outside PR professional Kay Floyd of Kay Floyd PR in San Antonio, who made it her personal goal to have Texas MedClinic visible in some media publication or broadcast at least once a month. "I recognized that the mention might be some small announcement published about a physician hired, but the size really didn't matter," explained PR firm owner Kay Floyd. "The fact that it may not be a major story every month was of little consequence; my goal remained to have people from the community say to the owner that they see his name and business everywhere."

Six years later, local reporters now regularly use Texas MedClinic as a go-to source for particular types of medical stories, and the clinics frequently receive widespread media coverage about medical conditions they treat, as well as publicity surrounding new openings and product launches.

PR Considerations

Developing a PR campaign and continual media outreach can often be more effective than advertising. However, defining goals and knowing the approximate lead time for success is critical in these efforts. Before initiating a PR campaign, hiring an outside agency or approaching media, an urgent care provider must have the following:

- Upper management buy-in;
- A decision about handling PR internally versus external execution; and
- Full understanding about the success lead time

PR professional Kay Floyd states that buy-in must be both philosophical, as well as financial. "Often, the financial side is the easiest," explains Floyd. "Cutting a check is simple, but the commitment to meeting the time constraints of reporters, being mindful of HIPAA laws and regulations as they relate to broadcast footage and having a medical professional readily available to explain complex medical terms in com-

mon language is the difficult part."

Also, urgent care centers must initially decide whether internal or external efforts make more sense. Marketing Director Gwynn Deaver of Texas MedClinic says that for a single urgent care center, handling PR internally isn't realistic. "I wear a multitude of hats, so it's not logical for me as the marketing director to handle PR, nor do I have the expertise needed." Deaver also cautions that if an urgent care center does decide to execute PR initiatives internally, hiring the right person is imperative. "Someone fresh out of college with a PR degree is not the best option, because deep media relationships are formed over time and those just entering the workforce don't have those longstanding relationships."

Even with hiring an outside PR agency, urgent care businesses must also recognize that PR success doesn't happen overnight. It took Texas MedClinic 3 to 4 years before reporters began calling for its medical expertise without outbound prompting or pitching.

For Texas MedClinic, a commitment to meeting reporter deadlines is one strategy that has helped achieve this success. "We conduct interviews within 30 minutes to 1 hour after each reporter call, making that commitment an important part of what we do," explains Deaver.

Tips for Hiring the Right PR Agency

While the cost of an outside firm may be first and foremost in mind, an urgent care provider should not select a firm based solely on price. Kay Floyd recommends that if plans include hiring an outside agency, the following considerations should be made:

- Look for an experienced PR practitioner – experience is well worth the money.
- Find a practitioner who belongs to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Members of the Society, whether individuals or agencies, are involved in ongoing PR education and know best practices in the field.
- Locate someone who has healthcare experience or has other healthcare clients. Knowing the reporters who cover the types of stories you want placed is invaluable.
- Determine if the potential agency or individual has longstanding media relationships in your community. If a particular media personality covering healthcare has never heard of the agency or individual, be wary.

Press Outreach: Getting Off on the Right Foot

Hiring the right individual or PR agency is important

because understanding the story needs of local press is the first step in effective media outreach. Around the country, newsrooms are shrinking and are often a shadow of what they were two decades ago. In this news climate, knowing what *not* to do may be even more important than knowing best practices.

Neal Barton, news director for KETK-TV in Tyler, Texas, says “Calling in or writing to say that ‘you need to or better cover this or that story’ is one sure way to create animosity with overworked assignment editors, reporters and news directors. “The story must have value to the audience and meet the station’s brand,” explains Barton.

Even in knowing what not to do, developing a story idea that can break through the barrage of pitches and story leads that can easily reach 50 emails an hour is a difficult task for most PR professionals. However, KCNC-TV Assignment Editor Doug Hoffacker from Denver, Colorado, lists several ways to rise above the PR-crowded landscape with reporters:

- Know the media outlets in your area. Not every story fits every news station or publication’s audience; some stations are focused heavily on hard news, while others make feature stories a major part of their broadcast.
- Determine which reporters cover the types of stories you will pitch. If you don’t know, call the assignment desk and ask. Assignment editors have short attention spans, as their tasks often include handling details around breaking news stories; it’s often more advantageous to reach out directly to reporters.
- Develop a rapport with medical reporters or producers. Call reporters and mention a particular story upon which they’ve recently reported, then ask about other stories in which they might have an interest.
- Be respectful of time constraints. Reporters, assignment editors and producers are wearing multiple hats in newsrooms across the country and have little time to chitchat about stories. Craft pitches as succinctly as possible and provide the necessary details about time, place, possible interviews, as well as offering ideas about the type of visuals that can be provided.

Tips for Getting Television Coverage

In the past, television news consisted of noon, 5 p.m.

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and 10 p.m. broadcasts; now, news is required throughout the day. “It’s equally important for us to obtain news for the morning shows, Facebook and Twitter pages, as well as for all newscasts,” explains Hoffacker. “We need updates continuously to keep the

news flow going and to satisfy our audiences.”

Keeping the story pitches coming from businesses and PR professionals is important to KCNC-TV, so Hoffacker often speaks to PR professionals about the right way to pitch a story idea. He has developed the following pitch tips based on his station’s needs and offers the best way to have stories hit the air. Those include:

- Keep it short. Broadcast stations typically decide the day of an event about news coverage, not before.
- Communicate efficiently. Email the media outlet, then place a phone call within a half hour later to follow up.
- Be timely. If you can, tie your story pitches to a major trend or into current news.
- Realize the audience and ask the question. Will your entire state care about this story, or is the story of interest only within your particular neighborhood?
- Cast a wide net. If one station doesn’t bite on the story idea, try others, as well as large and small newspapers alike.
- Avoid calling at bad times. Monday mornings, Friday afternoons, 9:30 a.m. to 10:15 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. are heavy planning times for television news departments and are some of the worst times to call.
- Schedule news conferences at 10:00 a.m. or 11:00 a.m. Reporters can get to news conferences easier at those times than at 3:00 p.m. when it is closer to the busy afternoon news block.

Next Steps for Handling PR Internally

At the end of 2011, PR Manager Suzy Buglewicz, who handles all client-related press releases for iTriage product launches throughout the country, took note of the hospitals, physician practices and urgent care centers that had stellar media success. In all cases, Buglewicz found that those medical providers who had engaged an outside PR firm or had developed local media contacts with an internal PR initiative had the greatest number of media hits after launching iTriage in their respective communities.

With the help of Buglewicz, iTriage offers press release

writing and distribution services to help its clients that haven't yet embraced the nuances of media outreach, but for those urgent cares that want to "dip toe" into PR, she offers these steps for press release distribution:

- Always include a press release in the body of an email, never as an attachment. Some reporters automatically delete all emails with attachments for fear of virtual viruses.
- Offer to send a high-resolution photo or video clip somewhere in the pitch or press release. Print publications and online media sources like visuals and this will help the overall pickup of press releases.
- Keep press releases to no more than 2 pages; 1 page is ideal for reporters inundated with story ideas and press releases.
- Include contact information (email and phone number). Reporters will quickly hit the "delete" button if you neglect the most important details.

Conclusion: PR Sources and Facts to Know

With urgent care mergers and acquisitions, as well as expansions across state lines, coordinating and hiring multiple PR agencies can become necessary. In those instances, one source to consider is the PRConsultants Group — a collaborative of senior-level PR experts located in every major market in the United States. When PR is required for multiple media markets, urgent care providers can access this collaborative to meet PR needs anywhere in the country.

Determining agency costs and quantifying success is difficult, as numbers often vary. However, here are some figures and information upon which to base your proposed PR initiatives:

- Average cost to hire an outside agency – \$750 to \$2,000 per month
- Expected time for outside agency success – 3 to 4 years
- Expected time for internal PR success – 4 to 6 years
- Types of stories easiest to place: Hard news, such as information on H1N1, methicillin-resistant *staphylococcus aureus* and changes in state law relative to vaccinations

For urgent care providers contemplating PR, the most important question remains: What is the potential return on investment? The impact of PR may be difficult to gauge in the early stages, but the efforts can make a significant impact on business expansion, community visibility, and the bottom line without adding additional marketing dollars.

To illustrate, in 2005 Texas MedClinic had 8 clinics. "Today, we have 14 and are opening one to two clinics each year," explained Deaver. "Without PR efforts, we would not be enjoying the expansion we have today. An uptick in patient volume can typically be tracked to every new story." ■

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