

The Happening

Staging an event—or participating in one—can help introduce potential patients to a practice in an up-close and personal way.

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Staging an event—or participating in one—can help introduce potential patients to a practice in an up-close and personal way.

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Peter Drucker, the top management thinker of the 20th century, once stated, “The role of marketing is to make sales superfluous.” Indeed, marketing is a key component of any premium practice, and I have long believed that marketing is much more than advertising: it is any and every activity performed to attract potential patients to your practice. As the effectiveness of advertising dwindles (courtesy of the DVR, satellite radio, and news headlines pushed to smartphones), many wonder how to invest wisely in attracting patients. This month’s Premium Practice Today focuses on the staging of events, and you get to hear from noted public relations expert Georgette Pascale why events are an important part of the marketing mix. In addition, you get some topnotch ideas from practices around the country. Putting on an event entails much more effort than placing an ad; it is also more personal, more engaging, and ultimately better for starting and building relationships with people who, now or eventually, will be looking for services that enable them to see better.

—Section Editor Shareef Mahdavi

Your surgical skills are stellar, and you have the outcomes to prove it. In the competitive world of refractive cataract surgery, however, it takes more than word-of-mouth referrals and a well-designed Web page to attract the volume of patients necessary to convert significant numbers to premium implants. The importance of a strategically designed marketing plan is often cited in the pages of *Premium Practice Today*. The emphasis on virtual or online marketing initiatives may inadvertently minimize the crucial human element—especially as it applies to health care. A truly well-rounded and effective marketing plan will include opportunities for the surgeons and staff to interact with the community and thus serve as walking, talking billboards for the practice. Hosting or participating in a charitable or educational event can help brand the practice by strengthening its visibility in the community. More than that, the live, face-to-face connection offers potential patients a sense of what they can expect if they put their eyes in your hands.

Examples of events that premium practice surgeons say they participate in include seminars designed to familiarize prospective patients with surgical options, vision screenings that provide a free service to the community while simultaneously identifying patients who need care, and charitable events to benefit a group or person in need. These activities can be low-key or elaborate, depending on the practice’s marketing budget and goals. Either way, they add a personal touch that patients appreciate in a society that increasingly defaults to “virtual” initiatives.

FACE TIME

Georgette Pascale, owner and CEO of Pascale Communications (Fairfield, CT), stresses the importance of face time with stakeholders—whether they are patients or clients. “No matter how evolved the practice’s social networking plan is or how deep its advertising budget, the surgeons have to carve out the time for ‘meet and greets’ and other events that will make them



“Now more than ever, people want to feel reassured about how their health care dollars are being spent.”

— *Georgette Pascale*

visible to the community if they want to generate word-of-mouth referrals,” says Ms. Pascale. The marketing and public relations professional represents clients of both David and Goliath proportions in the ophthalmic arena. “Not everyone is looking for their information online, and now more than ever, people want to feel reassured about how their health care dollars are being spent,” Ms. Pascale adds. “This is especially true of patients of a certain age. Ultimately, you really have to get out there and talk to people when your goal is garnering new patients.”

“Events are an easy and effective way to grow a medical practice,” says marketing professional and author Laurel Tielis. 📍 In her book *Ka-Ching! How to Bring in More Sales* (www.laureltielis.com/ka-ching-how-to-ring-up-more-sales), Ms. Tielis explains that events enable a business or practice to stand out from the crowd and they lead to increased visibility, credibility, and profitability. “They’re especially valuable in professions such as medicine, where advertising is sometimes seen as self-serving,” she adds.

Community events in particular, such as health fairs and charity events, show that a practice is a good neighbor. Ms. Tielis points out that an added bonus is that these types of events increase the likelihood of media attention. Even if no reporters arrive on the scene, there is still the opportunity to post news or video about the event on the practice’s Web site, Facebook page, YouTube account, or Twitter feed during the event and then intermittently afterward. Updates on social media sites about engaging events that people can relate to or empathize with are much more likely to be forwarded or retweeted. This garners even more exposure than, say, repetitive posts about two-for-one LASIK specials. (See *Online e-Vents Can Go Viral* and *Events With “Legs.”*)

The physicians of Boston-based Lexington Eye Associates show their good neighbor stripes by volunteering their surgical services for a week every year in El Salvador. The practice hosted a local event this year, 📍 the Walk for Vision (www.tinyurl.com/63bkefq) to help fund the mission and to further support the goals of the Asociacion Salvadoreña Pro Salud Rural—Salvadoran Association For Rural Health. The group exists to serve the visual needs of indigent people in El Salvador. In addition to having a premium IOL conversion rate of approximately 35%, corneal and cataract surgeon Jeremy Kieval handles marketing for Lexington Eye Associates. He says the primary and secondary goals of the Walk for Vision and the prac-

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tice's annual mission work are to provide surgical services to people who would otherwise go without eye care and to fulfill an obligation to give back to the community.

"There's the stereotype that physicians are at the top tiers of the economy, and I think that it's important for the community to see that we care," explains Dr. Kieval. "It's an intangible that we're able to convey to our patients and potential patients through our charitable efforts. It probably helps brand the practice, but that's not why we do it."

PRACTICAL MATTERS

To those considering events as part of a marketing strategy, branding and marketing consultant Jon D.

Stephens, president of Rockhill Strategic LLC in Kansas City, Missouri, stresses two things. First, he advises practitioners always to focus on what is in it for the participants. Second, he says physicians must decide how they plan to communicate with participants after the event.

The Lunch & Learn Lecture series hosted by Florida's St. Luke's Cataract & Laser Institute reflects Mr. Stephens' recommendations. Participants are treated to a complimentary lunch and educated about various ocular conditions, including cataracts. Prerecorded surgeries are most often broadcast during these events. Once a month, however, the main Tarpon Springs facility hosts live cataract surgery, which guests watch via a satellite camera. The operating physician and technician both wear microphones throughout the procedure, so the participants are privy

ONLINE "E-VENTS" CAN GO VIRAL

You want to be charitable and reap the benefits of having your brand/practice associated with a charity, but you do not want to incur the cost or commitment involved in planning or participating in an event. There is another option. Pick a date, for example, the anniversary of your practice's opening, and give a percentage of the day's revenue to a charity of your choice. Alternatively, you can stage an online contest inviting people to nominate a worthy charity. The next step is to report your endeavor via your Web site, a newsletter, and all available social media outlets. The face-to-face aspect is absent, but the good neighbor message can go viral, especially if the charity is one with a healthy marketing budget of its own.

Furlong Vision Correction in San José, California, sponsors the Gift of Sight Program by providing free eye surgery to needy recipients. Earlier this year, Michael T. Furlong, MD, posted this on the practice's Facebook wall: "We just kicked off our 2011 Gift of Sight Program—a program started in 2002 for those who cannot afford corrective procedures. This is one of the most rewarding times for me and our staff each year. 📍 We're excited to work with Hope Services (www.hopeservices.org; San José, CA) for the sixth consecutive year. They serve children, adults, and seniors with developmental disabilities. Three clients and seven Hope staff members will receive free vision correction surgery. 📍 Follow their progress right here on our Facebook page (www.tinyurl.com/3wuojsn)."

Although the surgeries are performed at Furlong Vision

Correction, the "event" begins online starting months in advance with notices about the chosen recipients of surgery. It continues with postings about the kickoff of the Gift of Sight Program on the day of the first surgeries. Later, additional postings from the recipients themselves expound on the impact the procedure has had on their lives.

Dr. Furlong's involvement is publicized by both his practice and Hope Services. Additional coverage was provided recently by a local television station that filmed a segment dedicated to Dr. Furlong's being presented with a Jefferson Award for the practice's Gift of Sight program. Jefferson Awards honor community and public service in America; 📍 their primary purpose is to serve as a call to action for volunteers in local communities (www.jeffersonawards.org/board/faq).

The possibility that the practice is further branded in the community's mindset is a perk of the Gift of Vision Program, according to Dr. Furlong. The more immediate benefit, however, is one that is shared by the staff. "The Gift of Sight brings the whole staff together in a really wonderful way," he explains. "While the patients benefit from this program, everyone at Furlong Vision Correction is so uplifted from this heart-warming experience. It is an incredible team-building time, and we are all humbled and grateful to be able to contribute to the Hope Services community in this way."

Michael T. Furlong, MD, may be contacted through his PR representative Elaine Sullivan-Digre at (408) 267-3643; elaine@sullivanworks.com.

to everything that happens before, during, and after the surgery. After the procedure, the surgeon, technician, and patient join the group for a question-and-answer period. Colleen Singer, a member of the practice's marketing staff and the organizer of the event series, says the main goal is to educate participants. "Naturally, we hope that, if and when the people need to have that procedure, they'll come back to St. Luke's," she says. "They've already been to the facility and met the surgeon, so there's a rapport. The lecture series is about building relationships with the community."

In-house flyers, newspaper advertisements/announcements, Web page notifications, and Facebook postings are used to invite interested individuals to register for the Lunch & Learn lectures. At the event, attendees are asked to fill out a form with their contact information, and as they exit, they are given the opportunity to schedule a procedure. "A week or two after the lecture, participants are contacted by a scheduling department staff person, who calls to thank them for attending and to let them know

AN EVENT WITH "LEGS"

An excellent example of the exponential promotional benefits that can result from partnering with a charitable event are evident in a recent initiative by The Zehr Center for Orthopaedics in Naples, Florida. As part of the practice's strategic marketing plan, it sponsored a new local event called the Galloway Captiva Triathlon (www.captivatri.org). A portion of all of the registration fees for the race was donated to a community program that provides meals to a soup kitchen as well as several Meals on Wheels programs.

As part of its sponsorship, the practice received a complimentary entry in the race, which it parlayed into an online contest that generated considerable interest in the community. Contestants uploaded a photograph and explained in 100 words or fewer why they wanted to compete. Photographs and essays were posted online, and a voting system was created. The woman who was eventually named the winner did not leave much to chance. After her entry appeared online, she shared the link on her Facebook page, and her friends voted for her and shared the link as well. In just 8 days, she amassed 9,105 votes, almost 50% of the total 18,608 votes cast. Those 18,000-plus votes represented an equivalent number of hits on the Zehr Web site. Ginny Cooper is the marketing consultant who orchestrated the contest and Zehr's involvement in the event. She says, "The winner had an inspiring story, which I promoted to the media. Within a few days of the event, Zehr had already been mentioned in two local newspapers." *The Huffington Post* and a local television station also contacted the winner for interviews, and the TV station planned to film the event as well. "The event itself has garnered tremendous local coverage," says Ms. Cooper. "My only regret is that we weren't fast enough on the draw to be the title sponsor."

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"If you don't know the revenue generated from an event, you cannot determine its effectiveness."

—James Dawes

that, if they ever need our services, we'd love to take care of them," says Ms. Singer.

Sometimes, a patient is invited to speak at the Lunch & Learn lecture about his or her cataract surgery experience 1 month postoperatively. "Hearing about the surgery from someone their own age who recently had the procedure helps people get a clear understanding of what to expect and minimizes their fear," says Ms. Singer.

James Dawes, chief administrative office for The Center for Sight in Sarasota, Florida, says, "A great event is one that attracts new patients and provides an opportunity to schedule an appointment or gather contact information for our lead database." He explains that The Center for Sight opts for participation in visual health seminars and vision screenings where lead generation is likely. The center avoids events like health fairs where exposure is the primary benefit. Mr. Dawes targets audiences such as those at golf clubs and specific residential communities for vision seminars where participants can commit to providing follow-up contact information. "It is important to track the leads from event marketing over time in order to determine one's return on investment for the event," he stresses. "If you don't know the revenue generated from an event, you cannot determine its effectiveness." One of the most important metrics to determine the effectiveness of an event is conversion. "How many contacts or leads were developed, and how many converted to an appointment?" he asks. "If an event is not going to yield appointments, then you really have to question the value or purpose of the event." ■

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