

# MARKETING SAVVY:

## **Bolster Your Occupational Health Program**

### **Enlist Physicians as Value Champions**

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The following scenario strikes a familiar chord with too many people who lead occupational health programs:

It's Monday morning and the phone rings. It's your boss, who's just received the latest financial statements and now she has questions about your program. Specifically, she wants to know why it isn't making money. "Don't you know that the parent organization is in a budget crunch? How can we possibly continue to support a program that doesn't pay for itself?"

She also wants to know if you really need to have a board-certified occupational health physician. "Couldn't a PA do that work for less money? If your program didn't carry so much expensive overhead, it could at least be making a better margin." What's more, she wants a plan addressing how to improve the profitability of the program by the end of the week, or the program is in jeopardy of being cut.

Your initial reaction may be, "But they just don't understand." This scenario is a common one, however. Whether in a hospital setting or a freestanding environment, we've probably all experienced it in one way or another.

The real art to preventing this conversation from happening depends on one important thing: how you work within your organizational relationships and program stereotypes to gain the recognition and support your program needs to thrive.

Your physician champion can play a key role in moving this scenario beyond the realities of today and into a more positive future. The ideas and tips that follow can help lay the groundwork for this movement.

#### **Overcome "But They Just Don't Understand!"**

One of the first steps to overcoming the lack of understanding of what your program does is to acknowledge the other side's point of view. Occupational health programs, as typically structured, are known for directly contributing large sums of money to the bottom line of an organization. The challenge becomes how to show the value of your program in a way that is relevant. Therefore, the role that the physician plays in your bottom line is critical to strengthening leadership's understanding. The physician who delivers occupational healthcare needs to be intimately involved in planning your business, capturing data, and reporting outcomes of the program—and be visible to leadership.

This involvement provides a perfect opportunity to share accountability with the program director/business manager and to reinforce the value proposition to the hospital owner or private investor. Nothing speaks louder than seeing these two functions working together toward agreed-upon goals.

#### **Treat Your Business Like a Business**

Ask yourself some basic questions about your business plan.

- Are you familiar with the plan?
- Do you use it as a benchmark to measure and manage?
- How well does your medical director/physician champion know the contents of the plan? Has s/he bought into it?
- Are mutual goals set for what you want to accomplish and how you're going to accomplish them?

Generating direct revenue will be an issue, so work with your physician champion to recognize the issue and develop a plan for addressing it, including how to track spin-off revenue and referral relationships. This will ensure leadership's buy-in and commitment. Have the physician marshal the clinical team to ensure proper coding and record-keeping.

#### TELL THEM

Your administration and/or investors can't know what your program is doing unless you tell them. You've lost a significant benefit of measuring your program's value if you fail to communicate the results to those who influence decisions about your program.

#### **Tell Them About It**

Your administrative leader or investors can't know what your program is doing unless you tell them. A significant benefit of measuring your program's value is lost if you don't communicate the results to those who influence decisions about your program. Program leaders really don't want to hear about how busy the program is, or how much activity is occurring. They really want to know about bottom line results.

In other words, how has the activity translated into results that either meet or don't meet business goals? What are you doing to build upon the positive trends, and what is your plan to turn around the less-than-favorable ones? Proactively addressing these issues goes a long way with leadership towards building confidence in your program.

#### **Find a Champion**

Your physician champion can be a vital element in communicating your message. S/he can provide key insights from personal experience in directly treating patients from client companies.

Enlist your physician champion to be a visible spokesperson for your program. Help this person gain exposure to your administrative team, involve her/him in client advisory meetings, and position your champion for an active role in the leadership—and advocacy—of your program. Recognize opportunities for both of you to stay visible internally, and use every meeting as a chance to sell and position your program.

Think strategically about how you and your physician can enlist the help of others in the organization to support your cause, especially with finance, care management, and information systems. Key departments are those that benefit from your spin-off revenue—physical medicine, radiology, laboratory, and surgery.

Interestingly, these departments are all big revenue generators for a hospital or other healthcare organization, and they clearly benefit from your work. Therefore, it's essential that they understand the importance of your relationship—without your referrals, their revenues wouldn't be as strong. Provide them the opportunity to better understand what the field of occupational health does and what they need to do to keep your referrals.

Too often, the healthcare world views occupational health as a stepchild, and affords it no clout. But remember, your program is a customer of many other health-related services, with a physician champion who wields the referral pen with the same strength as any external physician.

## Cultivate Referring Physician Relationships

The relationship of your physician champion with referring physicians is paramount to having quality outcomes and superior customer relationships. Much like internal departmental relationships and referral patterns, referring physicians must have an understanding of your program and what you hope to accomplish, as well as your expectations of them.

In a sense, your referring physician is a partner in your care delivery—someone to whom you entrust the care of a client’s employee. Therefore, the way in which the care process is coordinated and facilitated through the referral physician is an extension of the service you provide. Use your physician champion to meet with the referring physician on a regular basis to discuss cases, share outcomes, and plan enhancements. This is an excellent way of providing a continuum of care that better meets expectations of the clients you serve.

One of the biggest complaints with medical delivery today is that “one hand doesn’t know what the other is doing,” and that a client company must spend an inordinate amount of time piecing together the care that is being delivered. With coordinated care and case management coupled with the active involvement of your physician champion and referring physicians, huge steps can be taken to address such complaints.

### FIVE WAYS TO INVOLVE YOUR PHYSICIAN CHAMPION

- 1** Ask your physician to help You promote your program By becoming involved in:  
an agreed-upon business plan with outcomes that everyone commits to
- 2** internal communication about the plan and updates on outcomes
- 3** Internal education about the value of occupational health and its ties to the rest of the healthcare organization
- 4** Client communication and education-in sales, patient treatment processes, and long-term client plans for optimizing healthcare for their employees
- 5** developing and facilitating a referring physician network

## Strengthen Client Relationships

Next, it’s important to strengthen the client relationship so clients truly view you as a resource and partner, and not just as a necessary evil. The goal is for them to see your program as the answer to larger issues they may have, such as on-site care or healthcare for the families of their employees. You also want them to see you as a resource for broader healthcare options than just basic workers’ compensation or lump-and-bump treatment. Therein lies the larger value of occupational health to your hospital or other ownership organization. The client relationship and partnership brings significant goodwill to other elements of your larger organization.

Use your physician champion to help to build client relationships through regular meetings with client representatives to set mutual goals. Continue building these relationships through regular communication and by setting individual patient goals.

Create a tool for measuring results that is customized for each client and report to them regularly. With a constant stream of information about the tangible benefits (and not just the amount of activity) of working with you, they can’t help but see your program and its team as indispensable.



## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Deliberately aim to involve your occupational health physician champion in multiple areas of your business. Your champion can be a powerful advocate for your program at the administrative level and can underscore your credibility within the larger realm of healthcare delivery

Don't get lost-take the successful route by focusing on:

- tangible business plans with measurable outcomes;
- consistent internal and external communication plans;
- demonstrated teamwork between your physician champion and the program administrator;
- established value with internal customers;
- strong relationships with referring physicians;
- vibrant partnerships with clients.

Achieving these outcomes ensures that your occupational health program has a long and prosperous existence; not only for the benefit of your organization, but ultimately for the benefit of those served. ■■■

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