



Relationship: Nice Word, Great Approach — If It's Done Right

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Have you counted the use of the word relationship in recent brochures or publications? In some respects, it's become a word that's lost its meaning. However, it's still a word that holds important power in creating a strong strategy in your organization—when it's used and done right.

On a recent phone call a prospective client said, "My boss read your article about physician relations and wanted one of those, so he hired me." Flattering, but scary, because developing "one of those" and investing in a strategy of trust and communication—a true relationship—requires much more than a hire.

Here are five questions to ask internally to determine if you are ready to invest in the development or re-tooling of a physician relations program:

1. Is there top-down commitment?

Many programs work beautifully as grassroots efforts. This one will fail if senior leadership is not on board.

2. Do we have the ability to manage new business if we ask for it?

Managing new business is about capacity—beds and specialists—but it's also about systems, process and functions to support the expectations of the new referring physician.

3. Is physician-driven business a core strategy for the organization?

For example, for some organizations, managed care is still responsible for steering a great deal of the business. If you can't be all things to all people, make sure you're first taking care of the relationships with those you value/need most.

4. If the physician relations approach is employed, is the organization in a position to give it time to create inroads?

Physicians, or any other customers for that matter, are not impressed with stops and starts when you are working to build rapport, offer insights and gain trust. Add the fact that changing

some specialty referrals is an 18-month process, and you have the makings for false expectations and poor results if you don't have a set timeline and outcomes.

5. Can Operations, IT and the planning department be counted on for support?

A physician relations program is reminiscent of an old saying, "No man is an island." The most effective programs in this country are collaborative efforts with many departments lending their expertise and creating an environment that recognizes the role of the physician as a valued customer.

If you don't have all five elements moving in the right direction, there are some tough choices to be made and you need to consider if you can get there. Can you educate and gain commitment from senior leadership? Can you create an approach that focuses on specialty areas where you do have capacity? Can you target areas where you believe you can get some quick wins so you are allowed to develop the program with a long-term focus?

Get creative. If you need help, get it. If the barriers are too large, continue to work with the internal team and position the value of the relationship program. Start measuring your success and encourage feedback from physicians. Soon, you'll be in a position to build a business plan and create a process and approach for enhancing relationships with physicians in your market.



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