

Tips for Assessing and Enhancing Your Physician Relations Program

This article appeared in SHSMD August 2003 E-Connect

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Today's hospital leaders know they need to have a strategy for working with their medical staff. Some already have a physician relations program in place. And many want to take the steps to do it better. Yet, leaders are wondering if their approach is the right one and what they could/should do to make it better.

The time is right for action, for several reasons:

- Physician relations today is an opportunity to strengthen or create crucial relationships.
- Having a strong, well-thought-out program gives you a competitive advantage.
- In today's tough environment, leadership teams desire a program that delivers measurable results.
- Those who've tried a program on a limited level are thinking about what else is out there.

One of the most important reasons for building on your current program can be seen in the healthcare headlines. Like it or not, economic volatility is here to stay. That includes looming physician shortages, a fleeting sense of physician and patient loyalty, and the fact that increasing competitiveness—and no new markets to tap—means it's necessary to take business from someone else.

Hospital executives tell us they're looking for a stronger physician relations model to deliver more satisfying results. Our advice is to, first, evaluate your current approach before jumping into additional offerings or strategies:

- Assess your market and current referral patterns. What does the referring physician want, need and expect from a hospital relationship?
- Clarify your service capability and the role of physician relations.
- Tie the business plan to organizational strategies and desired outcomes.
- Make sure there's internal buy-in—a commitment to and ownership of physician relations across the organization.
- Assess the current structure, reporting relationship and staff.

- Examine internal integration of messages, everywhere from the operations and staff level to marketing and leadership communication with physicians.
- Examine the internal and external messages to physicians.
- Determine the current performance criteria and if goals are being met.
- Evaluate your tracking and reporting systems to ensure delivery of desired outcomes.

It's important to realize that it takes a balance of internal and external relationships in order to execute a successful program. Just because you *have* a deliverable doesn't mean you're delivering it in the right way. Every successful program strategy requires some must-haves:

- A growth and/or retention focus that's created with the strengths and abilities of your organization in mind
- The "What's in it for Me?" (WIIFM) for the referring physician, with differentiation apparent in every service
- The right mix of skills from the hospital operations team to deliver the service and manage their issues
- A team ability to deliver on the promise, and a constant desire to exceed expectations
- The means to track and demonstrate results

Once you've examined your strengths and the places where you can improve, you'll be light years ahead. Start now and this time next year you will have gained some valuable advantages in your program. A stronger program means you'll have an increased strategic focus, the ability to deliver results that benefit your organization and its services, and the reputation as a resource and access point for physicians. And your bottom line will benefit with increased physician referrals, satisfaction, involvement and enhanced loyalty.



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