



Best practices in referral marketing:

The value of provider referrals for
patient acquisition

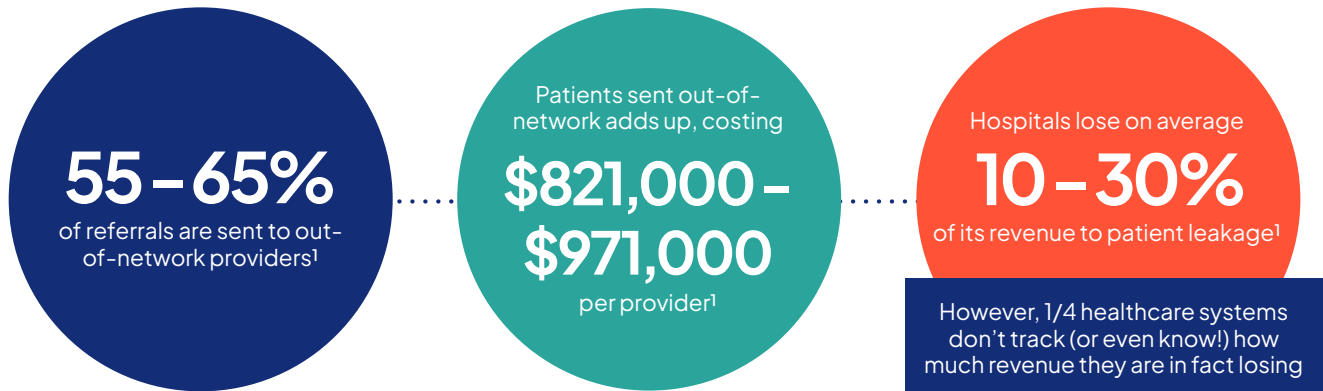
INSIGHT GUIDE

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Provider referrals are key to patient acquisition programs

Competition for new patients is fierce and healthcare organizations need to ensure they're maximizing every channel to reach them, including through provider referrals. Unfortunately, referral leakage is a major source of lost patients, leading to a significant loss of revenue.



Healthcare advertising in the US amassed \$23.5 billion in 2023², making us the world leader in healthcare advertising expenditures³. Even so, and with a projected growth rate of 4% by 2032², provider referrals continue to be a driving source for patient acquisition.

The new normal of provider engagement

Having a provider liaison visit primary care providers (PCPs) to physically bridge the gap between hospitals, specialists, and referring providers is no longer practical.⁴ Getting time with PCPs with tight patient scheduling windows has been made nearly impossible, making drop-by visits no longer viable and appointments hard to come by.

The challenge facing health care marketers is establishing a strong B2B strategy to foster referral relationships now that the provider liaison role, as originally conceived, is less effective. To position one's brand as preferred among referring providers requires a new approach based on five tactics:

- 1 Boost brand reputation
- 2 Practice always-on B2B communication
- 3 Amplify thought leadership
- 4 Influence the community
- 5 Target advertising to reach providers



Boost your organization's brand reputation

One reliable way to connect your organization to providers is to build its reputation. Awards programs and consumer feedback resources help, such as having your hospital recognized with a [WebMD Patient Choice Award](#), or your providers rank in the [Medscape® Provider Choice Awards](#).

For an understanding of how your organization and providers rank in key areas, you may want to conduct a survey of people who interact with you, including employees, the public, and vendors. A thorough understanding of your organization's image will help you recognize how your reputation needs to be bolstered or repaired.

Leverage awards and reviews

Even without a formal survey, you can obtain a considerable amount of data from online ratings and reviews. This data should indicate any systemic problems, such as a confusing phone system or general referral process, that need immediate attention. It also might help you recognize negative patterns in doctor or administrative behavior that could be causing referral leakage.

Top drivers for providers to rank a healthcare organization's brand first in the market:⁵



Always-on communication adds value

Maintaining an influx of patient referrals requires year-round communication. You should keep providers regularly informed about key hires, facility upgrades, research developments, and procedural expertise. A steady cadence of high-value content with referring providers can encourage better communication during the referral process.

Improve collaboration to foster referral relationships

Communication between specialists and referring providers should flow easily from the start, with a clear exchange of information about prior workups and any expectations the provider and patient may have. After consultations, specialists should leverage electronic health record systems to inform the referring provider about testing and procedures performed or planned, clinical findings, and treatment options. Open discussion ensures not only goodwill but also the best patient experience. Information is crucial to effectively coordinate care and see the big picture of a patient's health status.⁶

A study published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* found:

>60%

of providers find the referral process inefficient⁷

20%

of malpractice claims are attributed to errors in handoff between providers⁷

1/3

of patients reported that their specialist failed to receive their patient information from the referring provider before their scheduled appointment⁷

and the average appointment wait time for a doctor's visit is 26 days, with some specialty appointment wait times averaging as much as 72 days.⁸

Amplify thought leadership

Thought leadership is another avenue through which reputations improve and providers become more likely to refer patients to your organization.



Healthcare professionals are more likely to trust their patients' care to experts who advance scientific research and/or contribute to the education and training of other professionals in their specialty.

Your clinicians should strive to collaborate on research, write case studies, author opinion pieces, attend conferences, and help update their specialty's guidelines and practices. For example, when updated treatment guidelines are published, PCPs should be notified and reassured that your standard of care reflects the latest best practices. Marketing can share content such as decision-making tools, brochures, and links to web pages that update providers and patients on changes.



Thought leadership should strive to educate and activate

In a study on strategies to increase healthcare provider referrals for type 2 diabetes prevention and management, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) examined the best ways to encourage providers with low rates of referral to CDC prevention and management programs. Research showed that the most effective methods were providing PCPs with formal training or professional development, and educational materials. Workshops, webinars, lectures, group meetings, and other forms of education about a provider's specialty drastically increase the likelihood of a clinician referring their patients. Examples of educational materials to share include:

- **Brochures or pocket cards about disease states**
- **Marketing materials describing services**
- **Guidance documents that detail how and when to refer a patient**
- **Tools and resources that facilitate those referrals**
- **Information about billing codes⁹**

All of these efforts must be rooted in thought leadership. If you communicate and inform from a place of medical value, the message becomes exponentially more effective.



Help your patients influence their providers

It's no surprise that in the last couple of years, healthcare providers have made a dramatic shift to digital channels. In the past, non-personal promotion was a complement to other marketing channels, but more than ever providers are turning to online sources for their learning, networking, and remote interactions.



Having a strong social media presence gives you an avenue to control your brand's story and interact with patients and families. As you build your social media presence, be attentive and responsive and keep in mind the qualities that make your organization unique.

Avoid falling into the trap of generic tweets and posts by promoting your employees' accomplishments as breaking news, and feature past accomplishments, current projects, and personal tidbits. Isolate soundbite-worthy quotes about discoveries or topical observations and, when appropriate, add eye-catching images to encourage reposts and retweets. Getting the community to interact with your content fosters a sense of investment in your organization.



Leverage social media to engage the community

Videos can showcase your facility and your providers' expertise in ways that simultaneously reassure patients and engage healthcare providers who want to know more about your services. Specialists can answer frequently asked questions, discuss new treatments and research opportunities, and educational video content can be licensed to support your efforts. Short clips can be posted on social media with captions and links to the full video on your website. Other value-rich social media content ideas include:

- Participating in community discussions
- Positive patient experiences using videos and hashtag campaigns to encourage the public to share
- Virtual Q&As with your experts
- Publicizing staff events
- Posting health guidelines or advice about disease prevention
- Before-and-after pictures
- Themed content for holidays and health observances



Target advertising to reach healthcare professionals

Even though your focus is on healthcare providers rather than consumers, paid advertising works in the same fashion. Include valuable contributing data inputs, market-wide clinical activity, and provider dynamics to ensure a sound marketing strategy. Credible sites that build and publish content specifically for providers and healthcare professionals should be a part of your strategy too. Tapping into provider activity and referral data, as well leveraging 3rd party sites, gives you broad-scale reach and precision targeting power with referring providers.

Reach them where they are

Leverage predictive analytics to identify top opportunities. AI-driven propensity models offer healthcare organizations the unprecedented ability to identify opportunities before their competition does. Propensity models help organizations proactively structure their strategies, focusing on service lines most in-demand and therefore most likely to move the needle. By identifying historical outreach activity, referral volume trends, and other behavior patterns, organizations can inform provider campaigns by identifying the best providers to target for referral initiatives.

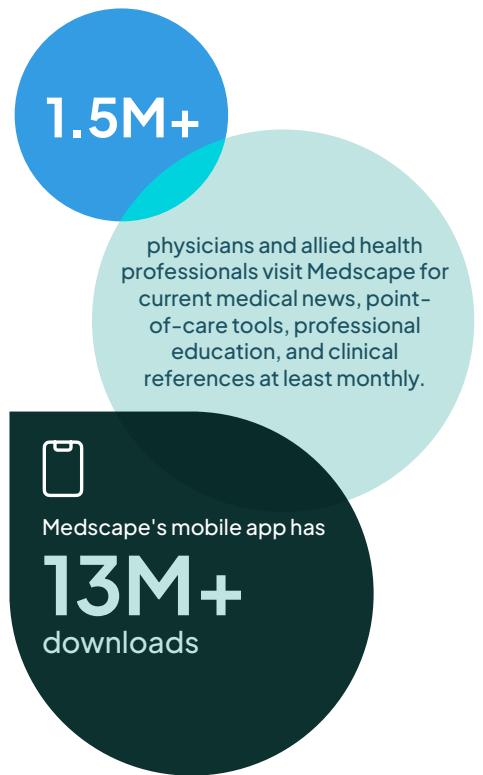
Contextual advertising, i.e., placing advertisements on web pages or in articles that are directly related to your campaign, is an easy way to amplify marketing influence. There are many platforms in which to reach referring providers, like [Medscape](#) and [PulsePoint](#), and provider directory services like [WebMD Care](#) and [Vitals](#).

Varied strategies and consistent effort

You only grab and hold the attention of healthcare providers with strategic, ongoing B2B marketing effort. While the traditional provider liaison role may be defunct, there are many ways for marketing professionals to meet virtually, follow up with referral networks, and check on key performance indicators.

Meanwhile, keep in mind that successful provider referrals often hinge on practical considerations, so scrutinize your organization for any flaws in the referral system. For example, many doctors' offices still use fax machines for referrals, which can delay or completely miss communications between PCPs and referring providers or organizations.

Referral marketing requires promoting provider referrals while stemming the tide of referral leakage. Retaining patients not only helps health care organizations financially, but also ensures a level of collaboration and data sharing that supports personalized, patient-centered care.



Conclusion

Organizational success really does come down to patient acquisition through healthcare providers and their referrals. But the days of the “drop-by visit” have long vanished, and for the better. A much more efficient strategy requires enhancing your organization’s brand reputation and maintaining always-on communications to foster both a spirit of collaboration and thought leadership. Use digital channels to showcase your provider’s expertise while also reassuring patients that they will receive the best care possible. Finally, reach providers where they are, employing a strategic, data-driven B2B marketing effort. It’s how you’ll win the trust—and referrals—of your most important providers.

Learn more



From Discovery to Recovery, WebMD Ignite is here to activate health with empowering content, engaging education and marketing, and intelligent, integrated clinical workflow solutions. To learn more about our complete suite of care management and member wellness programs, visit [WebMD Ignite.com](https://www.webmdignite.com), email us at healthplans@krames.com or connect with us:



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