

The Cornerstone of Urgent Care Marketing is Capturing Word-of-Mouth

Alan A. Ayers, MBA, MAcc

**Practice Management Content Advisor, Urgent Care Association of America
Vice President of Strategy and Execution, Concentra Urgent Care, Dallas, Texas**

A frequent question of urgent care operators is which form of advertising—radio, billboards, print ads, or television—generates the most visits for the lowest cost? Although an integrated marketing campaign utilizing a mix of mass media and grassroots tactics can be effective in raising awareness and capturing first time visitors, the number one predictor of future volume in an established urgent care center is actually current foot traffic.

Compared to conventional paid advertising, word-of-mouth marketing is nearly impossible to measure but it's also far more cost effective—in fact, it usually costs you nothing. It's always cheaper to retain current patients than to acquire new ones and the “advertising” that occurs when a patient recommends the center to friends or family is far more credible than any marketing slogan.

Although urgent care success is generally predicated on “location, location, location”—street visibility, high traffic counts, and ample signage—assuming the demographics are good and the facility is clean, I have also seen urgent care centers in otherwise “invisible” locations sustain profitable volumes because over time people learned about the “hidden gem,” and told others about their good experiences there.

Your patients are the best vehicle for positive word-of-mouth marketing, but how can you get them to talk about you? There are two keys—first, provide good service, and second, make the patient feel like an “insider.”

Good service entails treating the patient with respect. This means everything about the urgent care experience should be evaluated from the patient's point-of-view. Hassle-free processes, pricing transparency, short wait times, friendly staff, and an attractive facility are all “jacks to open.” Do these things and you'll provide a perfectly “ordinary” experience.

Going “above and beyond” focuses on the “little things” that will impress a patient to tell others—such as, did the front office staff make eye contact and welcome the patient when he entered the center, did the medical assistant explain the treatment process in a warm and caring manner, and did the provider listen and repeat back what he understood the patient to say? Every visit should have a positive close—“if you have any further problems, please feel free to call me at this number, and be sure to tell your friends about us.”

Making customers feel like an “insider” entails keeping them in the “know” and seeking their input on business decisions. Through patient newsletters, email communications, and social networking sites like Facebook—an urgent care operator can inform patients of what illnesses are “going around” and remind them the center is available for recurring needs like back-to-school physicals and flu shots. Keeping in touch will not only increase patient visits, it will get them talking about your center. Patient feedback can be gathered from paper or online surveys, focus groups, or patient recognition events at the center. Through these channels you can identify patients who trust and believe your service to be exceptionally high and ask them to write a testimony or arm them with a logo t-shirt, pens and/or magnets to share your message with others.

In short, word-of-mouth marketing requires giving people a reason to talk and making it easy for them to talk about you. Although the ramp-up time for word-of-mouth visits is longer than the immediate and passing boost that may come from a paid advertising blitz, word-of-mouth generated by quality service and patient involvement does result in steadily growing volumes that are sustainable over time.