

Eli's Rehab Report

Practice Pointers: Make a Good First Impression to Score Long-Time Clients

Try these expert tips to make your practice shine among competitors

When reimbursement is tight and competition is stiff, you can't afford to lose even one patient -- or fail to attract new ones. True, being out of network on a patient's insurance plan will heavily determine whether he's a keeper, but it shouldn't be the only deciding factor when it comes to wooing clients.

If your first impression is positive, not only are your chances of retaining patients higher, but you may still attract people whose plans are out of network -- or even people willing to pay cash for your services. Read on for expert advice revealed during the **TCI**-sponsored audioconference "Creating a Positive Payment Environment for Your Practice and Your Patients," with presenter **Lynn Steffes, PT**.

It Starts Outside of Your Clinic

A whole population of potential patients may not know about your great services unless you advertise externally, so it's important to communicate your services via the Web, the yellow pages, signage, brochures, or even radio spots and local television ads, said Steffes, president of Steffes & Associates in New Berlin, Wis.

Even better: You've hit gold if you can convince your local television news channel to run a spotlight on rehab therapy, featuring your clinic, Steffes said.

If you have a Web site, include information for potential customers such as a list of your services and their prices, a patient intake information form, your provider status, and your financial policies. All of this information in writing communicates the value of your services to patients and sets expectations right away, Steffes said.

Good idea: For the potential patients who inquire by phone, have a phone intake policy that both gathers and answers lots of information up-front. "Greet with your name and the business name, and be sure to use the client's name," Steffes said. "Identify his needs, respond to his questions and refer him to the next level if needed." Most important, offer an action step, such as offering to send more information, scheduling a follow-up call, or scheduling a screening or eval, she added.

At the Front Desk: Reach Out and Inform

When patients arrive, your facility's atmosphere should be friendly, professional, and contemporary. The front-desk staff should greet clients with enthusiasm and warmth, Steffes said. They should be ready to answer questions about pricing and insurance, as well as information about the practice, such as any specialty focuses and even outcomes data.

Do this: Offer new patients a welcome packet that includes a brochure, an insurance intake form, a medical history form, a HIPAA form and an intake letter from the practice owner. Good idea: "I love giving patients a magnet [with office info and the date of their next appointment]. It stays up long past their treatment and continues to market the practice," Steffes said.

Winning strategy: Don't stay behind the desk, Steffes said. Patients will be thoroughly impressed if your staff sits with them and assists them with forms when they have questions.

You might also offer an office orientation with a brief tour. This is a good time to promote your therapists' level of expertise and the type of care your office provides, Steffes said. If you can, introduce the patient to a couple therapists.

During the orientation, you should also have office staff review benefits and answer any additional billing questions. Best bet: Show patients a sample bill and ask if they have any questions, Steffes said. Then, provide a business card with the billing staff's contact info on it. The key is to treat the patient more like a guest and less like a patient, Steffes said.

Always: Set payment expectations up-front. Give the patient your financial policy in writing, and establish a payment plan right away, Steffes said. Offer both cash and credit-card options if you can.

Bottom line: Ask yourself what you can do to deliver value to the patient -- this goes for anyone in the office from therapists to front-desk staff. Remember, "patients pay for services that meet or exceed their expectations," Steffes said. So blow them away with your stellar service.

To purchase a CD of Steffes' audioconference, go to http://www.audioeducator.com/industry_conference.php?id=928.