

Just What the Doctor Ordered

Selling advertising to professionals

Healthcare and legal professionals present significant challenges and significant opportunities as prospective advertisers. Professionals are a challenge because they are difficult to reach and require a different sales approach from the typical retail or service customer. They present significant opportunities for several reasons. The high cost of professional services makes the return on an investment in advertising very high. One additional client can cost justify a large advertising program (I once sold an attorney who netted over \$400,000 from a single response to his ad). Because of the risk of ignoring medical or legal problems, professions are the ultimate recession proof business. Learning how to sell Physicians, Dentists, Podiatrists, Veterinarians, Chiropractors and Attorneys is a sure fire way to build your bottom line.

Professional economics

Once upon a time professionals did not need to advertise. Health or legal professionals could just hang out a “shingle” and wait for their clients to come knocking on the door. They could expect to make a very good living without any investment in marketing their practices. In the last several decades, the number of professionals has increased at a much faster rate than the growth of the US population. This demographic shift has made competition for clients and patients a fact of life for professionals, driving down their earnings. At the same time, their expenses have continued to rise. The cost of a professional education has increased steadily, most medical and law school grads must repay student loans in the six figure range. Medical professionals have also been affected by record increases in malpractice rates and in the cost of equipping an office.

The investment required to establish a small dental practice ranges from \$300,000 to \$500,000. All of these factors make marketing crucial to the success of a professional practice. To make a “professional” income, professionals need to attract a large client/patient base.

Understanding professionals

Professionals can be hard to figure out. By definition they are very smart people. Only highly intelligent people can get into, and survive the rigors of law and medical schools. They are taught to pay attention to details and to base their decisions on solid facts. They are also forced to do superhuman amounts of work and to work under extreme pressure. Professionals live their lives on a treadmill that never slows down. Interns work daylong shifts and young lawyers are judged by how many “billable hours” they can squeeze into a workweek.

Because they are constantly required to make crucial decisions, professionals must possess high levels of self-esteem and self-confidence. This self-assured attitude, combined with the respect awarded them by our culture, makes many professionals egocentric. These factors combine to make selling professionals quite demanding. To sell professionals, you must adapt your methods to their decision making style.

Here are some ideas on selling medical and legal professionals.

Identifying target accounts

Not all professionals are good prospects. You should concentrate your efforts on prospects with the following qualifications:

- New firms or firms that are growing. Professionals build their practices throughout their working lives. A stable, well established practice may be satisfied with their client base. New practices or practices that have added new partners or associates are more likely to consider advertising. Look for newspaper announcements of new partners or associates joining a practice.
- Professionals with a high turnover in their client base. Examples would be orthodontists—once their patient’s teeth are straight they move on, pediatricians—their patients grow up etc. These professionals need a steady stream of clients to maintain their income.
- Professionals who do not base their practice on referrals. Certain types of practices, such as orthopedic specialists or corporate attorneys, work almost exclusively on referrals from other professionals. These types of practices are not likely to advertise. Focus on prospects like general practitioners, Ob/Gyn or allergy specialists. Many types of attorneys get most of their work with people who have never needed an attorney before. These

attorneys work with workers comp, bankruptcy, wills, divorce etc.

- Professionals who handle high value cases. The classic example of this is the personal injury attorney. They are willing to invest large amounts of money in advertising because a successful case may be worth millions of dollars in net income to their firm. Plastic surgeons are the “big spenders” of the medical profession because their patients are generally affluent, and the fees for their very expensive surgeries are not covered or limited by insurance regulations. You can learn what types of professionals are advertising in your market by flipping through the local Yellow Pages, which continues to attract the largest share of professional advertisers. The ongoing decline of the phone directory industry has caused many professionals to move some of their budget to other media such as newspapers, local magazines and cable television. The free paper industry’s ability to target and saturate markets makes our products very effective in attracting clients for professionals.

Pre-call Preparation

If you try to “shoot from the hip” with professionals you are bound to fail. As discussed above they are generally impatient, have little time to spare and base their decisions on data. You cannot sit down and “chat” with professionals like you would with the owner of a hardware store. You need to make your case quickly and succinctly; this requires thorough pre-call preparation.

Do your homework—Once you have identified your prospects, research their practice and their specialty. Check to see if they have a website and look at any current advertising for their firm. Many firms have informative brochures that outline their services and philosophy, stop by their office and collect any information you can. Google their specialty and learn as much as you can about the services offered and trends in their field. I once sold a chiropractor because I had read about “pediatric adjustments” in a professional magazine in his waiting room, which led to a discussion of changes in his practice. Taking the time to research your customer not only prepares you to speak intelligently to your prospect, but also strokes their ego by proving your interest in them.

Prepare a proposal—Professionals are thinkers, they like to see things in black and white. A brief written proposal should list the benefits your recommendation offers, the specific product you are suggesting and the bottom line investment required. I like to attach a spec ad with the proposal. You will often find that a professional will only half listen to you, but will absorb every detail of your proposal at a later time.

Collect evidence supporting your claims—Remember professionals like to base decisions on data. If you recommend a program to a pediatrician because your product reaches a large number of young families, be prepared with demographics for your market. If you have other professionals advertising in your publication, have the like ads with you.

Speak their language Make no mistake, professionals practices are businesses, but they do not like to think of themselves as “crass moneymaking” entities. Professionals set themselves above the business world and like to see themselves as providing a service to the community. Always use the proper form of address “Dr.” for medical professionals or “Mr.” for attorneys. Remember professional’s egos are large and very sensitive. Do not refer to their “business” use “practice” and “customers” are “patients” or “clients”. With professionals I prefer to **avoid the word “advertising”, preferring to use “marketing”, “practice building” or “reaching out to potential patients”**. I often use phrases like, “This program would allow you to help the community by informing thousands of local families about the care your practice offers.” They will do the math and will translate this into dollars.

Reaching the decision maker Call the professional’s office and ask, **“Who is responsible for marketing the practice?”** Many professionals prefer to delegate this to their assistant or office manager. Also find out when the decision maker generally sets “business” appointments. **Try to set an appointment with them, stressing that you would only require a few moments of their time. Persistence and a “sense of urgency” are crucial here.** I like to use phrases like, **“It is very important that I speak to the doctor” or “I am confident that Mr. Barrister will be interested in this information.” Don’t accept “no”;** keep trying to get through. Professionals can be difficult to work for; you have to convince the gatekeeper that they will not be in hot water for letting you in. If the phone doesn’t work, consider using the U.S. Mail. Write a short letter listing the benefits you offer and if possible listing other like professionals in your product. Stress that you will only require a small amount of their time; your goal is to minimize the risk of time wasted and emphasizes the potential benefits.

Presenting your program

Getting an appointment with a professional is a lot of work so you want to make the most of the opportunity. Be sure to arrive on time, and be prepared to wait (It is a professional's office after all). Dress professionally; your prospect may view casual attire as a sign of disrespect, professionals are very conscious of image.

Selling a typical retail customer should be interactive, with the reps asking questions to get the customer talking and to uncover needs. You seldom have this luxury with professionals. In most cases, a presentation to a professional is the sales equivalent of speed dating; you need to make your case quickly and clearly. You may get more time with an office manager, but their long association with professionals often makes them take on their habits.

Introduce yourself and thank the prospect for their time. Then launch into your presentation.

Here is an example:

"Good morning Dr. Kildare, thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I know your time is very valuable so I will get right to the point. Please do not hesitate to ask me any questions you may have. My publication reaches virtually every home in the area. We have had excellent feedback from some of the other physicians who have used our products to inform the public about their services. I researched your current marketing and I have put together a recommendation that will deliver your message to every potential patient in the area surrounding this office. Most people are like me and put off visiting a physician until they have a pressing need, so I recommend a weekly program that will keep your name and photo in front of the public. This frequency will consistently remind the public that you are here to help them and your information will be available to them when health problems arise unexpectedly.

I am suggesting a quarter page; this size is large enough to convey your message, while maintaining a clean professional look. To maximize the reach of your message, while keeping your weekly investment low, I have priced the program at our 52-week rate.

Do you have any thoughts or questions about the program?

Address any concerns or objections and then use an assumptive close. "We could start with next week's issue; do you have any changes you would like to make to the layout?" If the prospect says he would like to "think it over", ask if they need any additional information and set up a time to get back to them.

Most of my initial meetings with clients have lasted only 5 or 10 minutes and frequently resulted in a sale. One of the best things about working with professionals is that they seldom string you along. Their decision, good or bad is usually made quickly. Unlike most prospects, when professionals say they "want to think it over," they are telling the truth. They want to review your materials before making a decision. When they do make a decision, professionals usually will stick with it. This is why they are often the most loyal advertisers on your account list. My publication has a dentist who has been running virtually the same ad for over 20 years. If you hear a "no" from a professional, they usually stick with this decision as well. Put off making another attempt for at least six months, and then open up the discussion by offering some new "data".

Conclusion

Selling healthcare or legal professionals requires a professional salesperson. You need to prepare your recommendation and to communicate the value of your publication quickly and clearly. In addition to contributing to your bottom line, professionals can help you sell other advertisers. Professionals are often seen as community leaders and their presence in your publication will make it easier to sell the value of your products. Selling professionals is a lot of work, but the potential rewards more than justify the investment of time and effort.

When it comes to selling professionals—***"It takes one to sell one!"***