How eager do you think your patients are about recommending you and your practice to their closest friends or family members? Does coming to your office leave a great impression on your patients or is it just another “office visit”?

There are things you can do to significantly increase patients’ and parents’ eagerness to refer to you. Get serious about referrals: take the time to understand how lucrative they are to your practice and be diligent about adding new referral strategies to your marketing plan on a regular basis.

Referrals are typically the best kind of patient. They require the least amount of persuasion and often come “presold.” However, I see a lot of doctors who completely bungle these opportunities. More often than not, in referrals’ conversations with you and your staff they’ll reveal exactly what they want and their expectations. Then all you have to do is deliver.

The other mistake I see doctors make is not giving referrals the time and resources they deserve. If you want to generate patients, why not generate the optimal type of patients? Every time a patient walks into your office, you should visualize a line of people standing behind that person – all their friends and family – and realize that your patient probably has some level of influence over those people. As a strategy, you should be doing everything within your power to get them to refer three or four of those people. If you’re taking good care of your patients there is no reason why they should not refer at least one person. If they don’t, it’s probably because you...
never asked them to. Put some intention on referrals and they will go up dramatically.

There are also a few misconceptions doctors have about getting referrals. First, only long-time patients refer - false. Second, they only refer after they get tremendous results - false. And third, if someone’s referred once, you probably can’t get him or her to refer again - wrong.

When it comes to asking for referrals, earlier is better. Referrals are more likely to happen early in the relationship rather than later, so be actively seeking referrals in the days or week following the first visit. Don’t wait a year and then expect a lot of referrals. At that point most of the excitement will have faded. Sometimes referrals happen before there is any result whatsoever. In many cases, the thought of a result is more exciting than the actual result. As for a limit on referrals, if you keep your patients happy, they’ll keep referring. Drop the ball and you risk losing them and their referrals.

Start by setting a goal. Pull your last six- to 12-month referral numbers and come up with an average number of referrals you get each month. With these strategies, try to increase your referrals by at least 10 percent.

Now, let’s dive in and look at some specific strategies that will help stimulate your referrals.

1. Make Your Office Referable

The physical appearance of your office has to be appropriate to justify referrals. If your office hasn’t been updated in 10 years, it’s probably not a referable office. You should do updates - even if they’re minimal - every three to five years. A first impression is made as soon as a patient walks in your door. The parking lot should be clean and well-maintained. The exterior of the building needs to be in good shape with visible up-to-date signage. There should be someone at the front to greet patients when they walk in the door (not behind a sliding window glass). The magazines need to be current and you should have water, coffee or other beverage options in the waiting room. T.Vs, free Wi-Fi or computers with Internet access are all a plus. And of course, make sure your office is always clean and tidy. Your staff is a huge part of this. If they are warm, inviting, personable and helpful, they are like poison and will affect other employees and your patients. Give them a new role where they don’t have to interact with people or get them out of the practice. Gauge whether office updates are needed based on comments or compliments from patients and parents.

2. Communicate That You Want Referrals

Don’t assume patients know. Make it a point to communicate to your patients that you want their referrals. Many doctors are doing all the right things - they have a referable office and service is supreme, but they’re not letting their patients know that they actually want their referrals. Don’t make it complicated, just ask!

Asking for referrals should be intentional and built into the staff and doctor’s interaction with every patient. For example, as you leave the room or are walking the patient to the front desk say, “Mrs. Jones, we look forward to working with you as a patient. We would love more patients just like you. Would you reach out and tell two or three of your friends or family members about your experience with us?” If you’ve provided good service that day, your patients will be more than willing to do that for you.

3. Send Out a Patient Newsletter Regularly

If you’re not already sending out a patient newsletter, start immediately! If creativity isn’t your strong suit, there are many companies that will put a newsletter together for you. The magic of a patient newsletter is it gives you a way to leverage yourself and spread your reach. When you mail out a newsletter to a thousand people with a picture of yourself and your office on it, you’ll be showing up in front of a thousand people that day, without even having them enter your office. In every single newsletter you send out there should be several things that ask for referrals and promote your referral program. Newsletters are also a great way to highlight services, run specials or offer discounts and promotions. At minimum, do a newsletter every other month.

4. Market Your Referral Program Throughout Your Office

In addition to asking, one of the easiest ways to stimulate referrals is to show that referrals are greatly appreciated in your practice. Advertise it throughout your office. Put signs in places where you know people will see them - the waiting room, on the check-in/check-out counter, by the magazines, in the restroom, on the complimentary beverage table. Take it another step and tie balloons to the signs to draw more attention.

5. Run Referral Contests with Your Patients and Staff

You should always have a referral contest running. This contest can be held over a 30- to 90-day time period

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depending on what you prefer. Some of our clients who do one every month are bringing in 20 to 40 extra referrals each month. Follow this step-by-step process to run your referral contest.

Prizes can stay the same or rotate, just base the prize on your clientele. For kids, prizes like a bicycle or gaming system are popular. TVs, iPads and laptops work well for almost everyone.

**Step 1:** Go buy your prize and put it (or a photo or replica of it) in a prominent location in your office, along with nice signage that explains how to win. Also put something in each treatment room to advertise the contest.

**Step 2:** Mail a postcard or letter promoting the contest to your current patient list. If you have their e-mail addresses, send them an e-mail. Include a write-up about it in your newsletter. Promote the contest to your clients often and always include a visual of the prize.

**Step 3:** Make sure your team is promoting the referral contest with every patient who walks through the door.

**Step 4:** Choose a winner. Don’t forget to take pictures of the patient holding the gift with you and your staff gathered around and put the picture in your newsletter and on your Web site with a write-up promoting the referral program and how they can win the next prize.

Staff referral contests will get your staff fired up and focused on getting referrals. Let’s face it - you’ve got a staff and there’s a lot more of them than you. Your staff can be your best marketing source if they are motivated. The most successful referral programs happen in practices where the staff has taken ownership of driving referrals. Set up an incentive or contest that your staff will get excited about. You can pay them per successful referral or set a goal and reward them with a prize when they reach the goal. You can also run a contest much like your patient referral contest. The key to incentivizing staff on referrals is to set a goal for the number of referrals they have to get before it kicks in. The goal should be higher than the number of referrals you were getting before the contest. If you set it up like this, you shouldn’t have any hesitation about paying out the incentive or giving away the prize when they hit the number. It’s a win-win.

6. Gift Your Current Patients

The Law of Reciprocity says that people try to repay what another person has provided to them. Begin a simple gifting process to acknowledge your patients’ existence. This shows you know who they are and appreciate them. The Law of Reciprocity will compel them to repay you. They can easily repay you with referrals.

The gift can be small - a coffee mug, workout bag, hat, etc. Don’t get wrapped up in the item or the cost. Just a small token of appreciation will have a bigger impact than you think. Plan to send a gift two or three times a year. It might be sending them something on a holiday or their birthday or just pick a time for patient appreciation. Whatever gift you give, the patients will give back to you tenfold.

7. Present Every New Patient with a Welcome Letter and Gift

The welcome letter and gift is to be handed to the new patient when they physically come in for the first appointment. Don’t hand it over the counter, walk around to the front of the counter or walk it over to them if they are sitting in the waiting room and say, “Mrs. Jones, on behalf of Dr. Smith and our team we want you to know how glad we are that you chose us. Make yourself at home and let me know if you need anything.” The letter inside should say something similar, briefly explain the referral program and ask for a referral. You can even put a few referral cards in the envelope as well. The letter should actually be signed by the doctor. This will take a few extra minutes but makes a huge impression. Again, the gift can be small. It’s not the gift but the act of giving the gift that creates the wow factor.

Pay close attention to the results these activities generate and make sure your staff is carefully tracking patient referrals. If your referrals increase, keep doing the things that worked.

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**Author’s Bio**

Jay M. Geier is a speaker, consultant and the president and founder of The Scheduling Institute. He helps his clients reach new levels of success and create a lifestyle they dream of, using their practice as the vehicle. He has a unique ability for getting results in a practice by leveraging its current resources with a primary focus on the staff. The Scheduling Institute currently offers several on-site training courses that focus on telephone training, marketing and creating the ultimate new patient experience. The strategies in this article are the basic strategies the Scheduling Institute clients are implementing. For more information and special Townie pricing, call 877-216-8225 or e-mail at info@schedulinginstitute.com.