

FOUR KEY SLEEP CENTER MARKETING QUESTIONS ANSWERED

by Duane Johnson PhD



Marketing any business successfully requires continuous cultivation of the target market you've chosen to serve. Do you have a written marketing plan for your sleep center? If so, you should continuously be taking the actions that your plan outlines to assure your sleep center has an on-going flow of patients.

An empty bed neither serves the overwhelming number of patients with life threatening sleep problems nor does it generate the revenue necessary to create and maintain a healthy profit from your sleep service business. I interviewed Valerie Swift, Sleep Marketing Specialist, with the Sleep Center Management Institute, author of the manual *Market Your Sleep Lab*. Here are the answers to the sleep marketing questions I am most often asked.

Why must I market my sleep disorders center?

There are many benefits of effective marketing. It can help attract new or additional patients, increase your referral base, protect and deepen existing referral relationships, strengthen or expand your third party payor contacts, improve managed care contract negotiations, and achieve financial goals. Yet, some of you may say, "Our sleep center has plenty of sleep study patients. We are booked many weeks or months in advance. We don't need more patients. Can't you actually de-market your services by having more patients than you can handle in a timely manner?"

I congratulate you on your good fortune and yes, you can de-market if you do not manage that amount of patients well. But I

also warn you that success is one of the most dangerous times for a business. It is the time when a "take for granted" attitude often sets in. The actions taken to attain this success may no longer be continuously cultivated as we relax to enjoy the rewards of our success. If we relax too much or too long, we may find a competitor has entered our sleep market catchment area causing an erosion of our referral base.

What really is marketing?

While many sleep professionals think they know; marketing is often misunderstood. Marketing is an ethical, required communicative activity to keep your sleep disorders center competitive by attracting and maintaining consistent, reliable sleep patient referral sources and revenue streams.

The reality is that everything done at your sleep center is part of the marketing process - the sleep services you choose to offer, the way your receptionist answers the telephone and greets patients, the wait time your patients or referral sources experience before the sleep study is run and the patient's results are received, the clinical capabilities and people skills of your staff, the credentials your physician or sleep technicians have or accreditations your sleep center has, and even your payment and billing procedures. Everything contributes positively or negatively to your marketing outcomes. Marketing is exposure, education and on going cultivation of sleep patient sources.

What areas of sleep market research are necessary for my marketing plan?

Basically this is answered by the answers to 4 other questions:

1. Who is your specific, chosen target sleep audience?
2. What does that targeted sleep audience want from your sleep services?
3. Who is your sleep center competition and what does the competition offer your chosen sleep target audience?
4. What differentiates your sleep center from your competitors?

Should we use advertising, radio, television in our sleep center marketing plan strategy?

While there may be a place for external "paid for" media in your sleep center marketing plan, these media typically are very costly and not that effective compared to basic marketing tools. "Word of mouth" marketing, physician referral kits, asking for referrals, patient reactivation programs, and your sleep center brochures are far more productive way to produce results for the budgeted marketing dollars you will expend. And, do not forget public relations. The speaking engagements, newspaper write-ups, community education programs and other non-paid for exposure to your sleep target market where you educate about the seriousness of sleep problems, can attract many referral sources, patients, etc.

The reality is that we are always marketing as a sleep professional. The question that must be answered and evaluated on a quarterly basis is, "Are we marketing our center effectively, ethically, efficiently and in the most cost-containing manner?"



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