

The Importance of Branding Your Dermatology Practice

BY NAREN ARULRAJAH

Branding is one of the most important and most often overlooked aspects of marketing. We tend to associate brands with products and large corporations. If you are selling soft drinks or running shoes, you have a brand, but when your business is medicine, the concept might not even seem applicable.

In truth, branding influences nearly every consumer purchasing decision. That includes prospective patients who want to purchase dermatological services. If they have a choice between several practices, they will gravitate toward the ones with a message that aligns with their own goals and preferences.

WHAT BRANDING IS—AND ISN'T

Many people mistakenly use the terms “marketing” and “branding” interchangeably. Branding is part of marketing, but it is not actually about promotion. Rather, it is about defining your practice and connecting with people.

A branding strategy includes two parts. First is the brand message, which embodies the core values of your practice. Second is the brand identity, which provides instant recognition and connects patients with your message.

The value of branding lies in familiarity. From McDonald's signature clown to UPS brown trucks, certain words and symbols become synonymous with associated brands. You recognize them as soon as you see them. Moreover, you immediately connect them with certain ideas about the company's industry, products, services, and reputation.

DEFINING YOUR MESSAGE

Your brand message should convey the core mission of the practice and what sets you apart. What do you specialize in, what do you focus on, and why do patients choose your practice rather than another nearby dermatologist?

It might seem like a simple matter of convincing people that your practice is better. However, “better” is a subjective

concept. It depends on the priorities of each patient. One person might love a practice for providing quality results and personal attention, while another complains about lengthy wait times and high prices.

In addition to attracting more patients, effective branding can help filter out false leads. People who ring your phone or click your advertisements are actually costing money if they are looking for services outside your specialty, because they will not convert to patients. Even worse, those who schedule appointments expecting something other than what they receive can become a source of bad reviews and other problems.

No doctor or practice can be everything to every patient. When developing your marketing message, stick to the things that are truly part of your core focus. Whatever makes your practice unique also makes it superior in the eyes of certain people.

Branding should communicate what the practice is (or should be) known for and what sets it apart. This may include:

- Dermatological subspecialties, boutique practice
- Specific type of services such as family care, medical, cosmetic, or minimally invasive
- Standard of patient care, affordability, convenience
- Doctor's unique skills, reputation, philosophy, or approach
- Latest technology, spa setting, or anything else that defines the practice

DEVELOPING BRAND IDENTITY

The message is conveyed through familiar words or visual clues that people associate with your practice. Your brand identity allows people to quickly recognize your practice, whether they are looking at a sign on the building or an advertisement in the newspaper. It is consistent, memorable, and distinctive.

The power of branding can be seen in any Botox brochure or advertisement. The logo, the familiar shades of purple, and the similar font spark instant recognition. You probably realize that it is Botox before you even read the name. That is brand identity. The moment you recognize Botox, you have a wealth of information about the type of product, quality, and whether it aligns with your needs. Those ideas comprise the brand message.

The most common and powerful elements of brand identity are usually the logo, slogan, and name. However, it also extends to how you present your brand. It may include elements such as:

- A signature color, or color scheme
- Symbols, mascot-style characters, or spokespeople that you want to associate with your brand
- Graphic design and layouts, such as modern, elegant, or minimalistic styles
- Writing tone, style, and even specific fonts
- Key phrases, quotes, or words to be used frequently
- Your own name and photo, if it is an individual practice
- Anything else that symbolizes your practice

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: HOW TO BUILD YOUR BRAND

A brand identity can range from a few simple elements to a complex strategy outlined in a multi-page manual. This will depend largely on the size of your practice and scope of your marketing activities. Whatever you choose, it is important that it be consistently incorporated in printed and digital materials.

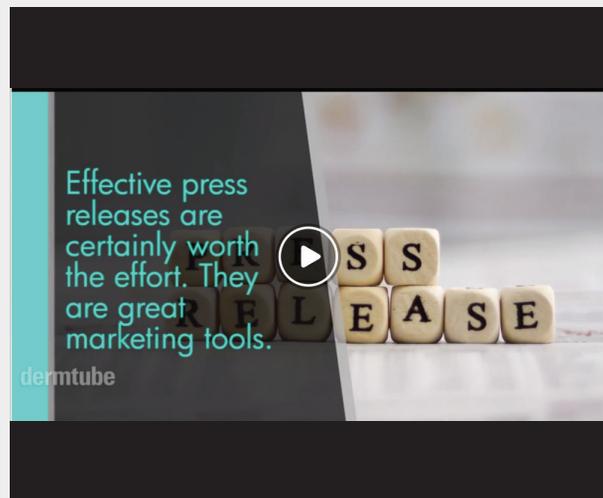
Whenever a prospective patient sees something from your practice, they should also see elements of your brand identity. This includes your website, advertisements, in-office signage, letterhead, business cards, newsletter templates, and anywhere else you present your practice to the public. With consistent use, people will begin connecting those words, phrases, and visuals with your dermatology practice.

The brand identity also needs to be associated with the core message. When developing marketing materials or patient communications, keep your brand message in mind. The key points should be common themes, highlighted whenever possible.

Most importantly, the message your brand conveys should be evident in every aspect of the practice's operations. Essentially, your brand message is a promise to patients, and it will not be effective if it is broken. In some cases, staff training, changes in policies or additional resources are needed to fulfill that promise.

Patient reviews are a great tool for finding out if their experiences align with your message. Customized feedback forms can include specific questions, relating to the core

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values of the brand. This provides a guide for improvement, and reinforces your message by showing patients that you genuinely care about those points.

BRANDED FOR GOOD

Building a strong brand is not difficult, but it requires careful planning and consistent implementation. It is well worth the effort if you want to take your practice to the next level. Branding is an effective way of bringing in new patients, creating loyalty among existing patients, and establishing a sterling reputation for your dermatology practice. ■

Naren Arulrajah is President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, a complete Internet marketing company which focuses on SEO, social media, marketing education and the online reputations of dermatologists. With a team of 140+ full time marketers, www.ekwa.com helps dermatologists who know where they want to go, get there by dominating their market and growing their business significantly year after year. If you have questions about marketing your practice online, call 855-598-3320 to speak one-on-one with Naren.

