

Physician Speakers Bureau: Linking the Permanente Medical Groups to the Marketplace

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Competition is increasing in the volatile health care marketplace, double-digit rate increases are coming in 1999, and managed-care bashing is fast becoming a favorite pastime of just about everyone. That's why it's important, now more than ever, for Kaiser Permanente (KP) to do a better job of communicating the benefits of its unique system of health care to consumers and purchasers.

One of the most powerful ways of doing this is by linking Permanente physicians to the marketplace through the Physician Speakers Bureau. Permanente physicians believe in the organization's mission and think it's a better way to practice medicine, so who better to tell the story? Gretchen Pugliese, KP Metropolitan Los Angeles Area Marketing Director, says, "There are very few things you can point to that differentiate one player from another. But there is no doubt that the unique feature of our health plan is the physicians of the Permanente Medical Groups. So we encourage our marketing professionals to take full advantage of that through the Physician Speakers Bureau."

How the Physician Speakers Bureau Works

When a KP sales executive needs a speaker to attend an event, he or she submits a request to Gretchen Pugliese for approval. She then passes the request on to Howard Fullman, MD, Physician Speakers Bureau Director, who matches the right physician to the particular needs of the sales executive. After the event, the physician receives feedback from the sales executive, and marketing expenses are charged to a cost center so that the Southern California Permanente Medical Group (SCPMG) is reimbursed for the physician's time.

Permanente physicians work with sales executives at open enrollment and health promotion events. They also speak at public relations functions for community leaders and purchasers and attend client meetings with small groups of key decision-makers or those who influence decisions. Presentations are tailored to the particular audience and might include information about how the Medical Group functions, advances in medicine, clinical outcomes, or management and treatment of diseases such as breast cancer or diabetes. "Every time I show up, they're impressed that a physician would take the time out to be there," says Scott Rasgon, MD, an internist at the KP Los Angeles Medical Center. "No other health care organization has this type of marketing advantage."

Putting a Human Face on the Organization

One could also say that no other health care organization is more misrepresented or misunderstood than KP. Market research shows that KP's "personality" is perceived by members and nonmembers alike as that of an impersonal businessman, not a caregiver. That's a difficult perception to overcome. But when a physician goes out into the community, whether to talk about hypertension at an employer-sponsored health fair or to discuss quality initiatives at a conference for benefits managers, the audience sees a practicing clinician who is personable, knowledgeable, and highly credible. Suddenly, the corporate entity has a human face—and it belongs to a caring physician, not to a "bean-counting" bureaucrat. And that physician is talking about the delivery of high-quality medical care, not closing stock prices.

Increasing the Credibility Factor

No matter how experienced, the KP sales executive does not have the same familiarity with and understanding of medical issues as a clinician, nor the same level of credibility with purchasers and consumers. When a businessperson wants to hear about medical issues, Permanente physicians can discuss in detail improvements in disease outcomes, quality initiatives, the latest preventive care guidelines, and standards that KP is setting in the health care industry. And Permanente physicians can correct one of the most common misconceptions that concerns employers and consumers alike about the organization by speaking authoritatively on the unique partnership between the Permanente Medical Groups and Kaiser Foundation Hospitals/Health Plan (KFH/HP) and how decisions about health care are driven by practicing physicians, not insurance administrators. Dr. Fullman, a gastroenterologist and SCPMG Board Member, says, "Purchasers see that our physicians care about their patients. And then they see that these same dedicated physicians are involved in making decisions for their Medical Group and for KFH/HP. It's an incredible image enhancer, and they're very impressed. The Physician Speakers Bureau is one of the most powerful marketing tools we have."

Keeping the Focus on Quality

With double-digit rate increases coming next year, purchasers are becoming increasingly concerned about rising health care costs and getting the most from their benefit dollars. But quality health care isn't about rate quotes and the bottom line. A Permanente physician can speak to a group about clinical initiatives and present the amount of



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research and data that you would expect to see at academic or professional society meetings. No one else in the industry can do that, and it helps to get the concept of price off the table and keep the focus on quality of care. "From a sales executive's point of view," says Gretchen Pugliese, "the Physician Speakers Bureau helps us give something more meaningful to the customer than just price."

Learning from the Marketplace

When Permanente physicians go out to the marketplace, they hear firsthand how consumers and purchasers feel about KP and what their issues and concerns are. Dr. Fullman, who speaks to groups frequently and represents SCPMG by serving on the Provider Committee of the Pacific Business Group on Health, feels that feedback—good or bad—is helpful in educating the Medical Group and KFH/HP about what's going on in the marketplace. "We all know we have areas of quality, reputation, and service that are not quite where we want them to be," says Dr. Fullman. "It's a good reality check for us to get out of our offices and learn what's going on in the marketplace. It has helped us to improve access to care and to become more customer-focused—and that increases our competitive advantage."

One of Many Success Stories

The Physician Speakers Bureau played an important role in one of KP's biggest success stories in Southern California so far—acquisition of the Times Mirror Company account in January 1996. With more than 2,500 eligible employees located in the Los Angeles area, Times Mirror and its subsidiary, *The Los Angeles Times*, were among the last remaining large-group employers in the area who had not contracted with KP. As Gretchen Pugliese tells it, "The challenge for the sales team was twofold: first to reassure potential members about our industry in general and then to dispel decades-old perceptions they had about Kaiser Permanente. So we deployed a team of physicians and sales executives to health fairs at the worksite to meet with potential members and their families face-to-face, directly answer their questions, and address their concerns. The end result was compelling—more than 1,829 Times Mirror employees are now enrolled with Kaiser Permanente."

Although evidence of the Physician Speakers Bureau's success is not always this dramatic, KFH/HP account managers as well as physicians who participate in the program believe that the Physician

Speakers Bureau is well received by purchasers and consumers alike. And audience feedback confirms their perceptions.

How to Get Started

According to Dr. Fullman, just a few hours was needed to start up the Physician Speakers Bureau. "First I 'put out feelers' for practicing clinicians who were interested in both public speaking and the business of the Medical Group. Once I had enough responses, I set up an organizational meeting to discuss goals and philosophy, determine each physician's areas of interest and expertise, and bring everyone up to date on current Kaiser Permanente 'intelligence.' We then held a training session to help sharpen participants' public speaking skills. The training included how to interact with an audience, how to judge whether you're reaching your audience, and the importance of eye contact and tone of voice. We also videotaped everyone's presentation and provided feedback."

"After training," continues Dr. Fullman, "we might ask each speaker to go out five or six times a year for a couple of hours each time, depending on the number of requests we receive and what the Health Plan sales executives need. But before we send a physician out, we do a good deal of advance planning so that we can provide background information on the group and what they're looking for from the speaker. We want to make sure the physician is well prepared and well received."

Dr. Fullman emphasizes that for a small investment of a speaker's time, the returns can be very rewarding. "I really enjoy going out to the marketplace. It's fun, a change of pace, and gives me the opportunity to meet people with a different perspective. In addition, I really believe in the organization and have a lot of self-interest in seeing it succeed. With the Physician Speakers Bureau, I have an opportunity to help get out a positive message about Kaiser Permanente, and I find that very empowering."

In the premiere issue of *The Permanente Journal*, Dr. Lawrence said, "We must effectively tell our story ... creating an unambiguous national signal that distinguishes Kaiser Permanente from the others in health care." The Physician Speaker Bureau is a powerful and unique way to be heard above the roar of the managed-care crowd. Summing it up nicely, Dr. Rasgon says, "The credibility I have with purchasers and consumers amazes me. My kids don't listen to me, but these people do." ♦

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For more information about the Physician Speakers Bureau, contact Gretchen Pugliese at (818) 547-6401 or Howard Fullman at (213) 857-2361.