

Insights from the Outside:

Increasing Referrals from Obvious and Not-So-Obvious Sources

This column features dentist **Dr. Howard Ong**, owner of Seal Beach Dentistry and veterinarian **Dr. Kathy Wentworth**, owner of PetPoint Medical Center and Resort.

Insights from the Outside is a group of practicing clinicians and practice owners. This is a diverse group from many medical specialties, including dentistry, veterinary medicine, cosmetic surgery, ophthalmology, audiology and optometry. This group was uniquely created by CareCredit for the purpose of capturing and sharing “best practices” to some of the common challenges all healthcare business owners face, such as attracting new patients, the patient experience, patient retention, social media, team training and empowerment and much more.

QUESTION: Why is it important to consistently generate referrals?

Dr. Ong: For healthcare businesses to be successful there must be patients walking through the door and patients in the chair.

You think that because you have something to offer people, they will just find you. Problem is, for the most part, they're not going to. You have to start with the end in mind and create referral programs that help your practice grow.

Dr. Wentworth: I agree. It's absolutely critical for every practice, not only for a new practice like my own practice, to continue to build a new patient base. It's the nature of the business to lose patients who move or no longer own a pet. It's important to keep increasing the underlying patient base. One of

the most powerful ways to acquire new patients is through referrals. It is essential to keep the business alive and thriving.

QUESTION: What is the difference between a referred patient and a new patient who found you from another source?

Dr. Ong: Big difference. One of the unique things about healthcare is the doctor is the product; we are the “widget.” When patients follow through with treatment, they are experiencing our skills and our goodwill, so when they refer patients, the goodwill is already built in. There's a sense of trust. The quality of the patient is much better and the likelihood of the patient following through with your treatment recommendations is higher.

Dr. Wentworth: They absolutely have more trust. You took the words right out of my mouth. That's because they have a personal recommendation. It's human nature to trust the advice of a friend or family member. And because the existing pet owner shared information about you, how you treat people and your services, the new one comes in with an understanding of what you do and what you offer and an expectation that they will be happy with your care and services.

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QUESTION: How do you develop a successful referral program that delivers constant desired outcomes?

Dr. Wentworth: It starts with the person's experience. No one is going to refer a doctor to friends and family if they are not 100% happy with every aspect of that practice - from the first call to treatment and follow-up. The entire experience must be exceptional so they're excited to share that experience with others.

Dr. Ong: I agree. It really doesn't matter how patients found you. If they have a good experience, they are going to stay. And if they stay and you treat them well, they are going to recommend patients. That's why we work on our practice culture each and every day. That's what people appreciate and are attracted

to. They want to feel like they belong and that they have chosen the right office for care. In an established practice, often people who have been with you awhile may not think you are even looking for new patients, so we specifically ask for referrals, but only when the timing is right. I have found the best time to ask for a referral is when they are delighted – when you've had a successful operation or a successful delivery of a device. For a hearing professional, it's when the patients says "I can hear better than I've ever heard" – that's when you ask for that referral. Anytime other than that, it loses its value. It takes time to develop that habit because it has to be a behavior in the team to recognize when that delight moment happens. Everything kind of freezes and we take the opportunity to ask for a referral.

Dr. Wentworth: Our pet owners know we are a relatively new practice and are looking to grow. Right now, we don't specifically ask for referrals, although many of our pet owners tell us they are going to bring their friends over. Our practice is pretty unique in our customer experience. When customers do refer friends, we offer a first complimentary exam so there's no risk to coming in and checking us out. We do have an incentive program where when a pet owner refers another, we give them a small credit on their account as a thank you. But honestly, most of our existing pet owners don't realize they are going to get a credit benefit. So, it's really not about the money for people; it's about them being delighted and wanting friends and family to have the same experience.

QUESTION: Are there any other best practices you can share that help encourage existing patients to refer?

Dr. Ong: One not-so-obvious best practice that we do is let every patient know our "why." A practice's "why" is the reason we choose to care for people; it is the genesis of all our actions, behaviors, processes

and systems. Patients know what you do, but they tend to be attracted to, and buy, why you do it. Passion for your craft is easy for them to see. A few of the other things we do are personally write notes of encouragement or to thank patients for the referral and personally follow up with patients who have gone through certain procedures. Patients really appreciate that. Whether you leave a message on their voicemail or talk to them personally, don't be afraid to call them. They are human beings and they are delighted to hear from you. One thing I did when I first started practicing was to pre-call just to say, "Welcome to my practice. I'm looking forward to seeing you." Most patients are first shocked, and then delighted, by this personal touch.

Dr. Wentworth: We do that, too! It makes people feel important. It doesn't necessarily have to be a two-hour conversation. It can be brief, but it's really that you are sincerely there because you care about them.

QUESTION: Can you share some best practices generating referrals from the community or other healthcare professionals?

Dr. Wentworth: We do a lot of on site promotion with property managers and business owners. We do presentation on pet health and get the opportunity to meet with new pet owners and their pets. This has brought in a tremendous amount of people who are curious and many are willing to have a trial experience with us. Most property managers and businesses are excited because it doesn't cost them anything and it's an event they can offer their residents. While we're there, we give everyone a free water bowl for their dog or a free laser toy for their cat with our logo on it so that they remember the name. We also reach out to the community and work with the rescue organizations. We offer specials and do fundraising. We also reach out to dog walkers, dog trainers and breeders. This may not be a direct referral, but they have friends who have dogs and pass on the word.

I'm almost in the opposite of the audiologist in that I refer people out to a specialist. And when I do, I want to know they are going to have a good experience. So I want to know my specialists, want to have a good understanding of how they will treat my referral and want to know the services they offer.

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Dr. Ong: For us, the best has been professional community talks. We invite other doctors in for education. It can be as simple as a presentation about your product or skill set. It's about building relationships with other colleagues and those in your referral funnel. It is great exposure and even though it may not be the number one draw for referrals, it will definitely make your practice visible and an authority of hearing health. Service organizations have been a big part of my life and have been a source for soft referrals. When you participate at community events and fundraisers, people see you being helpful and involved and are more inclined to think of you when they or a friend need a great community dentist. Another unique source of referrals is patients who have come to our practice through the CareCredit website, their Provider Locator on which we get a free listing. For us, CareCredit is part of the patient experience and our referral process, because it helps us help patients get the care they need. If patients can't get the care, they certainly aren't going to be referring friends and

family. We are seeing an increasing number of new patients come in through that source. And, finally, we have also started doing social media. We take pictures of our staff during the day, from serious procedures to light-hearted pictures. Existing and prospective patients like that they can get to know us and see what we're all about.

Dr. Wentworth: Ultimately, that is what it's all about.

When people know you care, that you're committed to doing the absolute best for them, referrals are a natural outcome.

Dr. Ong: I agree. It truly starts with why we chose to be healthcare providers in the first place – to help patients get healthy. If you and your team deliver on that promise in a way that is respectful, encouraging and unique, you'll see your practice grow.

For more Sound Strategies to help attract and engage more patients, visit www.carecredit.com/soundstrategies. If you currently accept the CareCredit healthcare credit card and would like to **optimize your listing on the online Provider Locator** to be even more visible to patients looking for an Audiologist in your community, contact your Practice Development Team at 800.859.9975 (option 1, then 6).



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE:

Dr. Howard Ong owner of Seal Beach Dentistry

Dr. Ong started practicing dentistry 24 years ago and joined the practice 10 years ago. Dr. Ong is specially trained in implantology, and has focused his love for implants and surgery by completing his Masters ICOI. He has also completed his Masters in the AGD program.

Dr. Ong is a member of the ADA, CDA, Harbor Dental Society, AGD, ICOI and holds a certification in DOCS and the Seal Beach Dental Study Club.



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE:

Dr. Kathy Wentworth owner of PetPoint Medical Center and Resort

Dr. Wentworth, owner and medical director, is board certified as a Diplomate in canine and feline practice. She has been practicing for 17 years in Southern California and has expertise in all types of pets in both conventional and integrative medicine. PetPoint is a family owned and operated 16,000 square foot premier pet care center that offers everything for your pets' health and wellbeing.