

Why doctors shouldn't handle patient communications

Thank goodness we all have something we are good at, and I hope we are doing whatever that is. After an incident this week, I hope doctors have the good sense to hire somebody who can handle communications for them (but maybe good sense is exactly what was lacking).

The letter

Here's the scenario: I received a letter from an ophthalmology practice I have been going to for the last two and half years. The letter introduces a doctor who is joining the practice. It goes on, in glowing terms, to describe the many qualifications this doctor has (apparently, with the exception that the new doctor roots for a basketball team the lead doctor does not).

The last paragraph is all about self-congratulation—let me quote:

I am proud that at X Ophthalmology, our dedication and skill has (sic) been recognized in Washingtonian's Top Doctors, The Washington Post Super Doctors, Consumer Checkbook's Top Doctors, and on Angie's List. Together, we will continue to provide the highest level of medical care in a warm and supportive environment. We look forward to assisting you and your family with all of your eye care needs.

The website

Now, let me add that my doctor is neither the letter's author or the new doctor. So, I went to the practice's website, which still reflected her name and not the new doctor's. I called and asked if my doctor was still at the practice. The answer was no. I asked why the website wasn't updated. The answer was

that it had happened very quickly (by the way, not so quickly that they did not have new letterhead printed on which the letter was sent). I asked whether they thought it might have been a good idea to inform my doctor's patients that she had left the practice and how to best contact her. I didn't get a satisfactory response. Clearly, this practice was just going to wait for patients to call and then tell them, which is not very thoughtful.

The letter and the website don't match.

In my opinion, this shows a classically inept way of handling communications because it fails to think about the target audience's needs. The lead doctor obviously thinks that patients will naturally want to stay with him and his new doctor, who after all, is the recipient of prizes and all sorts of post graduate degrees from prestigious universities. It does not take into consideration that people form personal relationships with their doctors and that a doctor-patient relationship is based on trust. I have already developed trust with my doctor, and I like her.

A better way: provide the information that your audience needs

The appropriate way to handle communications in this case would have been to introduce the new doctor while saying that my doctor had chosen to go to another practice. It would have also been good to update the website at the same time the letter was sent, making sure the new information was available by the time people got the letter. Additionally, the fact that this practice thinks it is more important to send a letter than to update a website shows a minimal understanding of how people get their information these days.

Perhaps for people who understand communications my comments seem fairly straightforward. Apparently, this doctor has no clue, and why he should probably stick to making medical decisions.

What do you think? Have you had similar experiences?