Not too long ago, the concept of “marketing” a medical practice was considered unnecessary at best and in bad taste at worst. After all, it’s plumbers and painters who advertise to attract customers; physicians just need to be good and reputable, and patients will find their practices... right?

Over the past two decades, however, numerous factors have contributed to a change in this viewpoint:

- Decreasing reimbursement rates that prompt the need to supplement lost income
- Increased competition from the growing number of other medical professionals offering minimally invasive procedures
- The rise of the Internet and its role in feeding information to health care info-hungry consumers

As a result, more and more physicians have come to realize that they need to change the way they operate and actively vie for the attention of their once-loyal patient base.

But the concept of marketing can be challenging for nontraditional business managers, like physicians, to grasp. Aaron Shiloh, MD, who has operated an IR practice in the Philadelphia area for nearly 15 years, says that, on the whole, marketing just doesn’t come naturally to him or his colleagues.

“We do an excellent job at patient care, but we are not good at getting our own patients,” he says. “We don’t get that training in medical school.”

Furthermore, marketing for medical specialists can be daunting—IRs, for instance, must reach out to several target audiences, such as referring physicians, patients, hospital administrators and others, often all at once. But how can you do it all and be effective?

### Making a connection

Eric A. Wang, MD, an interventional radiologist with Charlotte Radiology, in Charlotte, North Carolina, says his practice recently faced this exact challenge. As with most IRs, Dr. Wang and his colleagues rely heavily on physician referrals. However, despite the best promotional efforts of Charlotte Radiology, they were not growing the business as effectively as planned.

“We created a strong brand for Charlotte Radiology as imaging experts, but we were not effective in promoting our IR procedures,” he says.

Charlotte Radiology administration conducted research with physicians, hospital staff and patients to better gauge the need to create a unique brand for IRs. Interviews with referring practices about how choices were made revealed areas in which some previous marketing was not successful and where there were future opportunities.

“We eventually realized that many physicians have a hard time distinguishing between IRs and other radiologists,” Dr. Wang says. “The referring physicians don’t always make the connection with imaging and our role with both diagnosing and being able to treat the disease.”

The practice leadership and both the IR manager and director of marketing decided to create a unique brand for the IRs as “vascular and interventional specialists,” which was a separate division of Charlotte Radiology, to make it easier for patients and physicians to understand the difference. Then they conducted a traditional marketing campaign, creating flyers and brochures, as well as a unique logo and letterhead, to increase awareness that the new vascular and interventional specialists of Charlotte Radiology represent “the softer side of surgery,” through the use of minimally invasive techniques to diagnose and treat a variety of diseases.

Conducting research and tracking data are important elements of a successful marketing campaign, Dr. Wang says: “This combination of efforts has led to a targeted marketing approach that has been successful for our practice.”
Dr. Shiloh, who has been featured on local NBC and ABC affiliates discussing new treatments for venous disease and women’s health, also sees the benefit that marketing in general, and social media marketing in particular, can have on his practice’s success.

“Social media is a natural fit [for IRs and others],” he says. “We all have Facebook accounts and check them regularly.”

The key, he says, is to learn the value of the “social” aspect of the media for your business—branding and name recognition—and use it as a way to connect with and attract patients. To do that well, Dr. Shiloh advises, IRs should keep their postings personal.

“You need to create content that people can relate to and find relevant to their daily lives,” he says. “People want to hear news and receive information, like a new hire announcement, a work anniversary or dates for a health fair. Try not to sound like an advertisement.”

Social media offers other benefits, as well. For example, compared to other forms of marketing, such as creating, printing and mailing brochures or postcards, social media can be relatively inexpensive.

But it’s not free, he says. “Social media marketing takes a lot of time—several hours a week. It’s a commitment,” he cautions. “Time is money, whether it’s your time spent away from patient care and other tasks related to practice management, or someone else’s that you outsource. You can spend as much as $500 per week.”

Dr. Shiloh says he pays someone to handle many of the “nuts and bolts” office management tasks he can’t do on his own, such as search engine optimization management, but he handles all the content creation himself, out of necessity.

“Unless I can hire another IR as a writer, I am the subject matter expert,” he says.

Changing channels
It’s important to know the differences between the various social media outlets and how to use them properly, Dr. Shiloh says. Twitter, for instance, is good for one-off announcements and offers.

“It’s immediate and has a very short lifespan because it’s moving so fast,” he says, adding that it’s very time-dependent, too. “Tweeting in the middle of the night will not yield as much of a response as doing it at the start or end of the work day, or at lunch time, when people are more apt to be checking their accounts.”

Other forms of social media useful for IRs include Instagram and Pinterest, which are ideal for image-obsessed audiences: “They’re a good vehicle for showing before and after photos,” he suggests.

It’s also important to set expectations for yourself, when it comes to outcomes. Dr. Shiloh says: “MDs are used to being programatic and linear, direct. Social media is none of these things. It’s much more organic. It’s all about awareness and recognition. There’s no direct cause-and-effect-relationship—your phone is not going to ring every time you post something.”

“Marketing requires a multi-pronged approach, and you should always put out new content, in different ways,” adds Dr. Shiloh. “The phrase, ‘I found you on the Internet’ has a lot of different meanings these days.”

Using organizational tools such as HootSuite can help IRs be more efficient with their efforts. HootSuite lets users view all of their social media accounts in one place, and schedule and post once for all.

Dr. Shiloh also says that, no matter who is handling the account, it’s important to have a plan and stick to it.

“The key to success,” he says, “is consistency. If you start a blog, you don’t have to be good—just be consistent. If you can’t, then assign someone or share the task.”

And be engaging, he advises. “Don’t just repost what others are saying. Interact with your followers and others. Respond to comments and make comments on blogs and posts by others.”

In fact, real-time, face-to-face engagements may be the best follow-up to any marketing effort, says Dr. Wang.

“We evaluate our patients in a modern IR clinic setting, and that is something we emphasize to referring physicians and patients in the community,” he says. “Also, having IRs active within multiple hospital committees and having a strong presence at multi-disciplinary hospital conferences to discuss patient management with other physician specialists, has made a positive impact on our referrals.”

Henry Mortimer is president of MortimerCommunications.com, which works with health care companies to find their voice and tell their story in order to achieve their strategic goals.