

EPISODE 158 PATIENT CONVERT PODCAST

WHY REFERRAL BASED PRACTICES SHOULD FOCUS ON DIGITAL MARKETING

with David Schwegman, MD
CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER OF HYPERBARIC PHYSICIANS OF GEROGIA

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Why Referral Based Practices Should Focus on Digital Marketing

Please excuse any Typo's this was transcribed using artificial intelligence

[00:00:07] Hey, everybody, and welcome to another episode of the Patient Convert podcast, I am very excited about our topic today. We are talking to one of our longtime clients and a friend, Dr. David Sugarman, out of Atlanta. He runs, he's the medical director of Hyperbaric Physicians of Georgia. So welcome on the show, Dr. Sugarman. Tell us a little bit about kind of yourself, your background, how you got started in hyperbaric, all of that stuff.

[00:00:35] Sure. Well, thanks for having me, Justin. So happy to be here this morning. If you hear any noise in the background, it's just Hurricane Fred. We've got the tail end of that kind of coming through here, so I apologize if that comes through. But sure, so my background is sort of a circuitous route, which kind of how it works for most people in hyperbaric medicine. But I'm an emergency physician by trade, so I moved to Atlanta and joined faculty at Emory in two thousand one and spent the better part of a decade being an academic emergency physician with Emory and at Grady Hospital, which is the big trauma center here in Atlanta. And during that time, I used to be a private pilot, so I had developed some expertise in aviation medicine and was practicing, was doing a lot of lectures and talks on aviation medicine, which is medicine, you know, at 30000

feet in the air. And after about a decade of emergency medicine, my wife came to me with a photo album and I look through it and she's like, Do you notice you're not in any of the photos? And she's like, Look, you really got to specialize and do something that has a better, better life for a family. And so we wanted to grow our family at the time. And that's when I made the leap to some specialized in hyperbaric medicine, which was just really a natural offshoot for me because basically, instead of being medicine at 30000 feet, it was medicine at forty five feet below. So it was really just an opposite learning curve. It was really an easy transition for me. And with hyperbaric medicine comes wound care. And well, gosh, I'd been working at Grady for the last 10 years, so that's no problem. So it was really just sort of a natural fit for me.

[00:02:13] Excellent. Tell us a little about because most of the listeners, especially the physicians, are going to be familiar, at least at some level with hyper barracks. But making that change from emergency medicine, working for a large hospital and then going into private practice with something that has been historically very hospital attached when you think about hyperbaric. Talk a little bit about that journey kind of early on and will lead to kind of our discussion about how marketing and the patient journey has changed. But what did that look like early on during the transition and educating physicians on use cases for hyper barracks and growing to what is now become one of the largest independent barracks organizations in the in the southeast?

[00:02:56] I mean, actually, you know, it wasn't the medicine so much that was the challenge to learn. It was really the business practices, you know, the coding and the billing and the insurance pieces and the contracts for insurance and all of those pieces that go into running a private practice that really aren't involved in in hospital based medicine, the marketing piece and, you know, learning how to to speak to physicians, not just about their cases, but how to educate them. Most physicians don't really know anything about hyperbaric medicine. It's not taught in 85 percent of medical schools and residences. So basically nine out of 10 physicians really have no experience with hyperbaric medicine. And if they do, it's usually just something peripheral. So there were lots of different components to making that transition, and again, that learning the medicine wasn't the hard part. It was actually putting all of those pieces together so that you can run a successful practice and, you know, doing so in a manner that always puts patient care first. So when it comes to hyperbaric, most of what people know is what they see on the news and things like that, which is people that are misusing or abusing

the technology. So, you know, it's oftentimes looked at with a critical eye, which is totally fine by me because in our practice, we practice evidence based medicine. Most of us are emergency physicians, and evidence based medicine is really, really important. So going out and marketing to physicians, you know, we really took the articles with us and it's quite the journey. You know, back when we started doing this, you know, it was all feet on the street. So it was me and my white coat meeting with physician after physician, after physician handing article, after article, after article and trying to help educate my colleagues about what hyperbaric medicine is, what it does and how truly effective and even life altering it can be. So that was really, I would say, the hardest transition from being a hospital based emergency, especially academic emergency physician, into a private practice, you know, sort of entrepreneurial role.

[00:05:10] That's interesting, and that's such a narrative like by my wife, Kelly, who co-hosts this and everybody listens. Kelly obviously lives in the world of physician referral development and physician liaison, and we've heard that story, I'd say is the most common time and again, especially whether it's career transition or starting something early on, like what you've done is versus where you are now. It's always the story of, well, early on I was out like I could go out in my white coat and I could shake hands and build relationships. And then that obviously becomes unsustainable at some point, like where you are at in your career now and you just it's not feasible to go out there and and continue to shake hands. So it's like well-intended early on and then practice and clinics and the life of running a practice from a business and a patient health standpoint can get in the way.

[00:06:05] It's just not a good use of time. I mean, particularly for what we do. It's really it's unusual because I hate to say it. We're kind of like a roach motel in that patients come in and so we need referrals in. But because of the nature of what we do, we don't have a lot of referrals back out. And that's what's sort of different about what we do is that most physicians, you know, it's kind of like, Hey, nice to meet you. You scratch my back. I scratch your back. And with hyperbaric, it's just not that way. We don't have a lot in terms of offering patient referrals back that we do. But that added a layer of complexity where since they're the physicians weren't seeing this sort of direct benefit of referring to us, they weren't seeing referrals back. It made it difficult because, you know, you had to constantly say, Hey, look, we're here to remember and we're doing such a

good job for your patients and we're relying a little bit on their altruism. So it's very challenging in that regard and very labor intensive, interesting.

[00:07:09] That makes a lot of sense because yeah, when you there's always that from a story standpoint in terms of like physician liaison or herbage, building that referral is will get your patients back. You'll get your notes back, like outside of notes. There's not as much on y'all's in, which definitely makes it more of a naturally one sided affair. Like you mentioned, I loved your take because when we talk to physicians, I always like to hear kind of what they see because obviously we we talk a lot about it, but you're on the front line, so just be taking care of the patients when it comes to over the last several years, especially, I mean COVID in the last year and a half. Have you seen a change in the kind of how patients are finding you in terms of the patient journey? Obviously, there's still the referral component, but are you seeing kind of a change in the weather, so to speak, as far as patients being in tune with their health care and being able to kind of make a lot some of their own decisions in terms of being able to market directly to them and those kind of things. What was your take on that?

[00:08:08] Yeah, I mean, I think it's changed dramatically, but you know, I'm not sure if the landscape changed or if we just actually stopping dinosaurs, you know? So when we reached out to you guys, Justin, we needed help. We recognize the limits of what we were able to do, and we recognize that none of us in our practice are social media experts and internet experts, and we realize that that's really where the landscape was going even before COVID. But, you know, I mean, obviously, since COVID started, you can't get into doctor's offices, nor do I really want to go into the doctor's office. I don't want to shake hands all day long and they don't want to. They don't want to shake hands with me. You know, we try to keep our respectful distance so that we're not propagating this pandemic. So, you know, I think we all we had to evolve. And so I'm not sure if the landscape changed so much or if it was actually just the fact that we tapped the resources that you guys offer that has been there all along. So obviously for us, it was a dramatic shift. I don't know how much of that is market forces and COVID or if it's us again, just reaching out and using the leverage that you guys are able to provide us that we just simply weren't using before. But for us, of course, it's been a huge change for sure.

[00:09:23] I think that's interesting because there there seems to be health care traditionally always has, I'd say, a two to five year lag in adoption of say, like real estate or the finance space, what they're adopting in terms of marketing or technology. Whatever it may be, there always seems to be a pretty consistent lag in technology adoption, which seems to start taking a whole COVID kind of forced it upon everybody's landscape. But what's even more interesting is you all were really what I consider very early adopters in terms of using digital marketing to reach and educate both patients and physicians because traditionally whether we're very familiar with a subspecialty or. Not in terms of the agency, there's always a due diligence process to walk through in terms of essentially looking at what your geographical competitors are doing, what landscape have they carved out? How active are they on social media? How are they going about attracting patients through paid ads and stuff? And there really is no market or model in terms of marketing hyperbaric that's out there outside of maybe there's a practice in New York that that does a good job, but there's not many else in the entire United States to go out and even find a website to look at. So you are really kind of groundbreaking in terms of turning it on its head and saying we're built on physician referrals where we've got to be able to start educating patients and going direct to patients.

[00:10:53] Well, I wish I could take credit for that. I mean, basically, to be honest with you, that's actually you. You know, we kind of dropped our practice in your lap and said, OK, what are you? What can you do for us? And so really, I think the ideas of where we are from a digital marketing perspective, I don't think any of them really came from us. We were just like, Hey, we know we need to get into this space. What do you think? And so it's actually, you know, the credit all really goes to you, Justin, for getting us into the position that we are right now. So I wish I could take credit for that. Well, and it's

[00:11:29] Such a it's such a team effort, though, like being able to have access to you, for instance, and really talk

[00:11:36] You back and forth. And you know, that's really it's been a real eye opener for me because you're asking questions to me that I would have never thought of, you know, as a physician or even in business, you know, you're asking me things that I would have never thought of. I mean, literally, if I lived to be a thousand years old, I don't think I would think of. I mean, they're important and they're very relevant. And so it

really has been a collaborative effort. And obviously, I think what you've been able to do for us is predicated on the fact that we're sort of an open book handing you all the information that we have. But again, without help and guidance, I don't think we would be anywhere close to where we are right now from a digital marketing perspective.

[00:12:21] Well, I appreciate that and it's been it's something that we talk a lot to and whether it's content or webinars. And I think one of the reasons why we've had so much success partnering together is you and your team having the access like you just mentioned to be able to not only talk openly about ideas, but especially in a space that requires so much education. It is not a new space, but a space that is not well known in terms of the patient seeking information and education and being able to really sit down and and lay out what that journey looks like, what the questions the patients are asking. So something can be built around that that can really supply everything that the patient needs and not only drive patients through the door, but hopefully improve on the patient care journey and take some burden off of of you guys inside of the office. So you're not answering the same 15 questions every single time. Hopefully, people can find those resources online.

[00:13:19] Absolutely. I mean, the time that we spend answering the question over and over and over again is, you know, has a huge opportunity cost. And that's not where we want to be spending our time. So any time that patients can become more well informed. I mean, even before their first initial consult where we would, you know, we give them an hour of time and know what we're finding is that most patients now are actually they're doing their homework. And so that barrage of questions that used to be there, they're not there as frequently. And that frees up our time. I mean, if we don't have to keep repeating the same thing day in and day out, that's a huge win for us and know we'll potentially allow us to help more people. And that, you know, right now there's a waiting list to get in and see us or a significant time delay. And if we're able to be more efficient by not having to spend quite as much time educating patients, you know, then we can actually help more people stay.

[00:14:15] Yeah, absolutely. One hundred percent change gears a little bit. I wanted to talk to. And this is more about actually patient point of care and what hyperbaric can do. But y'all recently, which is something obviously as the marketer in me that I absolutely loved were part of a documentary around the PTSD universe and how hyperbaric can

can really has made tremendous strides in helping veterans, especially with the Fayetteville location that you all have, which is near Fort Bragg. I'd love to talk a little bit just straight to that and what you're seeing in terms of the PTSD side. And just to learn a little bit more about kind of putting that documentary together because it really is. I mean, it's such an incredibly valuable piece of marketing, but the story is incredibly powerful as well.

[00:15:01] Yeah. Well, I mean, I think there's this whole sort of bucket of post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury post-concussion. Syndrome. You know, they all sort of are in this sort of melting pot where we're finding that hyperbaric therapy is, you know, potentially truly life changing for these people. And it's obviously it's been our honor to be able to help take care of the veterans. I mean, the people that are willing to put their lives on the line for us. You know, the fact that we can give back a little bit to them has been huge. But to see, like, for instance, we had a veteran that was driving almost a hundred miles to come and see us every day, and initially he had to be driven up. They literally had to hold his hand to get him so that he can navigate to even find our hyperbaric chamber by the end of it. He was riding his motorcycle. Wow, that's amazing. And, you know, he came in and kept himself dressed and, you know, and at the end, he saluted us and it was it was an awesome feeling to be able to impact somebody's life that dramatically, it was really awesome. But it's really been a blessing for us. We really hope that, you know, for people that are struggling with post-concussion, post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury, that they investigate it and at least look wherever they are their local provider as a potential solution to help them recover.

[00:16:27] That's amazing. That's why I wanted to to bring it up is what's going on there and how many veterans that you all have been able to help is truly remarkable and something that's really exciting as you're able to help more and more and more veterans. And I'm excited to help be a part of the kind of patient story journey there, too. And I think that's what a lot of people miss out on and that you all are able to to do as you participated in that documentary. But there's so many patients out there that like the veteran that you talked that you just talked about and their story that are willing to become ambassadors and kind of tell their story from their point of view about the experience and excited about collecting that because those are going to be such powerful stories like you just mentioned.

[00:17:09] I agree. And you know, I mean, I love watching those stories myself for various other things, you know, seeing people's triumphant recoveries. It's it's awesome. And, you know, hyperbaric therapy, I think, is one of those things that for a lot of people, we've all experienced this in life where you say to yourself, you know, you learned something that was important and you're like, How did I not know this until now? How am I just hearing about this now? And that if I had a dollar for every patient that came to me and said, Why didn't I know about this before? Why didn't my doctor know about it? Or I wouldn't need to practice anymore? So the fact that we can get the word out and using the digital marketing space to be able to do that, it's really a powerful tool.

[00:17:53] Absolutely. Tell us before we wrap up a little, too, because you all have kind of a whole other area of your business that you help, a lot of physicians kind of implement a model similar to y'all. We call it consulting or whatever you want to call, but really all of the journey that you've been talking about today and that you mentioned early on about learning the business side, learning the credentialing, learning how to lower your supply costs, all of that stuff you all can. You are out there helping implement hyperbaric facilities all over the country. So talk a little bit about that too for the listeners.

[00:18:27] Sure. You know, they practice some hyperbaric medicine. Again, it's so unique. And over the last 30 years, we've developed expertise, and our expertise comes a lot from quite honestly stepping in it, you know, and that's

[00:18:44] Not to use honestly,

[00:18:46] You know, and fumbling our way through it to the point that we've made every mistake. We now know where all of the pitfalls and the hang ups are, and we can help practices go from the ground up without making any of those mistakes. Whether it comes from planning a center to build out to where you put your chambers or where you put your oxygen tanks to the workflow of the physical layout, to contracts for insurance, to be your marketing piece, to staffing, to billing collections. They're all really unique, and I know that there is a lot of companies out there that are sort of large practice management companies, and those are great for internal medicine and primary care and general surgery and things that that there's a lot of. But our practice is just so unique, and there's so few of us that using those services, it's not really helpful. They

don't really understand the ins and outs of what we do. And so obviously, there's a great need for more office based hyperbaric medicine practices. It's the future of hyperbaric medicine, honestly, and we don't want businesses to fail before they can get off the ground. And that's really our goal is to help practices that are in that space or thinking about that space really get there with a sense of comfort and know that they're not fumbling in the dark and just sort of making those same mistakes that we did. We were fortunate that you had enough wins to overcome our mistakes. But man, would we look a lot different right now if we had had the help that we're able to give to others?

[00:20:29] Yeah, for sure. And that's what's fantastic about kind of the the program that you'll offer is it's almost all it is consulting. It's kind of a mentorship to in terms of we can help you avoid a lot of the mistakes that we have learned over the years, which hits home for me too, because I started out in my mid-20s starting the business and I feel the same exact way is like, Oh, if I had known all those hurdles, I'd be in a totally different position today. But I think that there's also wouldn't be the same for you. The same leader, the same medical director have the knowledge that you had. If you didn't learn, learn those lessons along the way, too.

[00:21:05] That's true. You know, and you know, to be honest with you, I think in general, we all have a tendency or most of us have a tendency to say, Well, why spend that money? Why should I spend the money on a consultant or an expert to help me do this? I can do this myself and save a bunch of money. And to be perfectly honest with you, Justin, you know, we held hands for a long time before I committed to using Intrepy for our digital marketing and was like, Why I can? We can build a website for \$100. Why would I do this? And it's only now after the fact of having used your services where I went from that feeling of, well, why should I pay somebody to do this? It doesn't make sense to me. This is absolutely critical and an invaluable piece of what we do, and I can't imagine not having it. It's, you know, it's one of those 180 degree turnarounds because again, what we want to do is we want to offer value to people. We want to make it so that we ensure their profitability and we ensure their success. And that's exactly what we gotten from you guys where it hasn't we haven't felt like you guys are, you know, are taking from us. You guys are giving a lot more than what you take back, and that's how we've been successful in growing our business.

[00:22:26] I really appreciate that. That means a lot. And it's been such a fun journey over several years now, being a client and watching y'all grow and be able to work along side of you. And I'd say to that point that you mentioned, it's definitely one of the most common things, but I can't remember exactly how the quote goes.

[00:22:43] But well, yeah, my quote is, you know, I went from How can I afford to do this to now? It's like, how could I afford to not do this?

[00:22:51] Yeah, and that's the. Interesting thing, the way to look at it, and you've got to be really careful to the best way to describe it. If you get too cheap on whether whatever it is, if it's hiring building experts, consulting experts, marketing experts, there's a fine line there between a good and bad decision and everybody learns it as an entrepreneur just like we were talking about. But sometimes investing in the knowledge and the experience, and all of that is worth its weight in gold because hiring on the other end and living in the digital marketing world, unfortunately, we see it day in and day out, and it's how the agency world has developed a really bad name for itself of way over promising or using way, fancy words and completely under-delivering or stealing. And that's what you have to be careful. On the other side, too, is getting burned. Ninety nine percent of the time as a whole, lot more costly than than kind of making the right investments early on with whatever it is and whatever expertise that you're going out and bringing in houses, that's always something to. To keep in mind is the investment. If it's done the right way, always offsets the bad investment that may have saved money, but caused a lot of issues in the long run.

[00:24:05] Absolutely. 100 percent agree.

[00:24:07] Well, David, thank you so much again for coming on and sharing a little bit about your journey, about the barracks in particular and being such an amazing client for us over the years and supporting us the way that you have. Well, tell us before we sign off how the listeners can get connected with you and obviously learn more specifically about the practice, the consulting, all of that kind of stuff as well. And we'll have all of this in the show notes, too.

[00:24:33] Sure. The easiest way is our website, which is w-w-what HBO MD. So HBO for Hyperbaric Oxygen, MD for Physicians for Georgia. So WW W, HBO MD. And

there's a link there for physicians where they can find my cell phone number and email so you can call me, text me or send me an email from the website.

[00:24:57] Excellent. Again, we'll have that up in the show notes. And thank you again, David, for coming on and joining us and taking some time out of your busy schedule. It was really great having you on.

[00:25:06] Justin, thanks a lot for thinking of me.

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