How to Increase Clinic Utilization of Integrative Medicine Services in 60 Days

Increase patient volume and move your center into a position of sustainable, long-term profitability and growth.
Clearly, it is time for integrative medicine services to enter the mainstream. A recent Nutrition Business Journal report states that integrative medicine revenues now represent 2% of the $2.5T spent annually on national healthcare, and estimates a doubling in sales of integrative practitioner products and services from roughly $25B to nearly $50B from 1999-2010.¹ According to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), 40% of the U.S. population spent nearly $34B on out-of-pocket complementary and alternative therapies and products during 2007 alone.²

Driven by a combination of internal “clinician champions” (advocates of certain evidence-based integrative therapies) and patient demand (most notably from boomers who want a patient-centered, patient-empowered approach to the management of their disease and chronic conditions), the market for integrative care will continue its ascent.

Since 1999, most major U.S. medical institutions have established integrative medicine or integrative oncology centers within their facilities. Fast forward one decade, however, and many of these integrative medicine/oncology centers, while seeing moderate increases in clinic utilization, are still not economically viable.

Most centers rely on private donations, philanthropic support, and/or financial assistance from their institution to sustain their clinical operations and programs. Unfortunately, silos tall and wide remain within the major medical centers; there are simply not enough internal referrals from conventional doctors directing their patients to integrative centers. Moreover, consumer marketing efforts often rely on the parent institution’s traditional marketing communications channels, with the integrative centers traditionally not the highest priority.

If your center is like most, you have an urgent need to reinvent your clinical business model and to develop specific strategies to achieve sustainable, long-term growth. Fortunately, there are specific steps you can take to get more patients to utilize your services within a 60-day period.

This paper explores the many challenges facing centers and focuses on key areas that can positively impact clinic utilization. Although the primary focus is on larger centers, many of these same challenges and concepts apply to private integrative practitioners who specialize in oncology, functional medicine, naturopathy, preventive medicine, and Ayurveda.

What is Your Center’s Brand?

A strong “brand” is absolutely critical for your center.

It tells healthcare consumers who you are and what to expect. Yet most integrative medicine/oncology centers within larger medical institutions are not adequately distinguished from their “parent,” and are often branded using generic, outdated terminology, e.g., “The Complementary Alternative Medicine (CAM) Center of Institution Name.” While these centers typically occupy physical space within the institution itself, they are rarely fully integrated into the parent’s operation at the clinical level.

The integrity and prestige connected to a major hospital or cancer center is valuable and should be readily communicated to the consumer. While it’s important to leverage quality brand association, clearly distinguishing the value proposition of your center is imperative. CAM is passé and inaccurate terminology; your center does not offer alternative medicine in lieu of proven conventional care, and it should not be part of your name. Create or re-establish a modern brand identity that clearly defines the unique ethos of your center.

Make Your Center Stand Out

→ Use a unique name, incorporating today’s contemporary terms for integrative care—if you have a major benefactor, consider incorporating their name as well.

→ Develop a new, stylized logo and tagline.

→ Make sure your logo is being applied consistently everywhere it appears (on your brochures, letterhead, envelopes, business cards, invoices, etc.)

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Many of your integrative services are not covered by payers (e.g., acupuncture and dietician consults—except for heart or diabetes patients), and many health consumers are hard-pressed to pay for healthcare services out-of-pocket. This is especially true as insurance costs and co-pays continue to rise in a difficult economy.

Healthcare consumers need to be educated and convinced about the benefits of medical services not covered by most payers. This process starts with an internal audit of your branded collateral and consumer messaging tools. Take a close look at how your center communicates to prospective new patients across all channels.

**Jumpstart your consumer messaging:**

- **Apply your brand identity** across all marketing/communications efforts and collateral executions evenly, conforming to your established style guide.

- **Create copy that clearly explains:**
  - How your integrative center complements conventional treatments, examinations, and diagnostics.
  - Your menu of services, by category—including a history of each intervention and a description of the known science base, using multiple citations where available.
  - Insurance coverage—which services typically are and are not covered, and with whom a patient should talk with in regard to their specific coverage.

- **Clearly define and distinguish** between “alternative” and evidence-based integrative modalities and explain your center’s commitment to the clinical and scientific merit for each intervention/service offered.

- **Use photos (with captions) of** your center’s key integrative practitioners both in print materials and on your Web site; reading about a service and associating it with the face of a provider can make a lasting, positive impression.

- **Use patient endorsements and testimonials** focused on specific interventions or your center (being sure to comply with HIPAA laws).

- **Establish (or expand upon)** a community outreach program (see the section on Community Outreach—Delivering Your Message “Live”).

- **Establish a content development** production calendar and content marketing/dissemination strategy (see the section on Content Marketing).

- **Establish an appropriate social media component** that adheres to HIPAA laws.
If your integrative center is getting consistent referrals across the board from your institution’s conventional physician network—your colleagues—then you are an exception.

However, if yours is like most centers, you greatly rely on internal referrals to build clinic utilization, and can always use more.

Many of the conventional physicians within your institution don’t refer to your center only because they are not fully aware of the bevy of services offered, and how select interventions might help their patients’ outcomes. You need to educate them, and one of the best ways to do so is with an introductory brochure.

Communicate to educate:

Create a high quality brochure and accompanying set of PDFs that effectively communicate to physicians how and why your center is the logical partner to potentially improve the quality of life and outcomes for their patients’ health.

Much of the same content recommended earlier for your external consumer messaging program can be repurposed for this brochure. But now you are speaking to conventional physicians, and, frankly, many are skeptical of what you and your colleagues are doing with integrative medicine. Therefore, it is important to:

- Explain each intervention and its history; describe the exponential growth in the U.S. for many of the services your center now provides (read: if you aren’t providing these in-demand services, a competing center will).
- Clearly define in adequate detail the available science behind each evidence-based intervention, and include plentiful citations.
- Using the science, draw the line between each intervention and how it relates to symptom relief, for both acute and chronic disease and conditions (e.g., stress, anxiety, fatigue, nausea, inflammation, and pain, to name a few).
- Include photos (with captions) of your center’s leaders—medical director, scientific director, lead RN, center manager, and administrator.
- Use photos (with captions) of your leading practitioners next to each type of therapy; if you have quality images of the intervention itself, consider including these throughout the brochure as well.
- Be upfront about the realities of payers—many of your services are still not covered by insurance; referring physicians need to be aware of these realities and the financial stress that these costs can put upon their patients.

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External Messaging

Allopathic Community

To increase referrals from the conventional medical community, you need an external messaging strategy targeted specifically to this segment. This will require a significant investment in time, but will pay off in long-term dividends.

You are essentially looking to cultivate relationships with outside practitioner groups—including oncologists, primary care physicians, and internists—many of whom will initially be guarded, given that the much larger conventional part of your institution is often viewed as direct competition to independent practices. A certain amount of careful disarming is required when approaching local, conventional practices.

In many cases, it will be harder to convince outside providers to refer patients to your center than it is to convince your internal colleagues. The local conventional medical community, by and large, will not be any more aware of evidence-based integrative medicine modalities than those colleagues within your hospital. Again, education is paramount.

Communicate your most straightforward, easy-to-grasp integrative services and emphasize the evidence base.

A physical brochure is relatively inexpensive to print and will impart a different impression than a digital, emailed effort. Digital distribution can be used as a follow-up effort, and posting to your institution’s intranet should also be considered.

Make sure to include a brief, carefully crafted letter—better if personalized—to accompany your print piece. You want to ensure that your brochure is read, so your letter must 1) clearly and quickly communicate that your center would like more internal referrals, and 2) provide more information about the integrative services you provide. If you have an upcoming lecture, seminar, or panel discussion scheduled surrounding the interventions provided at your center, this is a good place to extend an invitation. The medical director of your center, and, ideally, the president of your institution, should be co-signatories of the letter. This shows internal support from management and conveys the importance of your communication.

In addition to your written communications, create an internal “community outreach” program solely for conventional physicians, RNs, and hospital administrators (see the section on Community Outreach—Delivering Your Message “Live”). This is a must, as it will “bring to life” the information you are working to convey.

Use a partnering approach, and highlight therapies that can complement a patient’s care and improve outcomes in several core areas, such as:

- **Pain management**—Acupuncture, yoga, mind-body techniques, and anti-inflammatory natural products, which may enable weaning off of stronger pain management meds
- **Nutrition/immunity**—Dietician consults, supplementation recommendations, prescriptive exercise
- **Stress/anxiety reduction**—Dietician consults, acupuncture, yoga, mind-body techniques, psycho-oncology

Although the complementary services offered by your center have been clinically proven to help reduce the symptoms of many different diseases and conditions, many practitioners are not offering these services to their patients. Simply put, most physicians don’t give much thought to the good that these interventions might bring their patients. Your efforts to educate them can change that. [cont’d]
Community Outreach
Delivering Your Message “Live”

Having strong collateral with the right messaging is very important to influence existing and prospective patients about your center’s products and services.

The same applies for influencing potential (and existing) referring practitioners—both within and outside your institution.

However, nothing is more compelling than getting prospective and existing patients and practitioners to experience “live” content delivered by your center’s leading voices. In marketing lingo, this type of content is known as “experiential marketing” and has traditionally been delivered by integrative medicine practitioners via community outreach, most often through public speaking (e.g., lectures, panel discussions) and presentations. Live engagement gives you an opportunity to educate consumers and practitioners about the clinical indications for specific integrative therapies, the science behind them, and the stories surrounding your patients’ terrific outcomes and should be a key facet of your strategic plan.

Get your center’s key providers involved and focus on one specific intervention at a time. Consider live demonstrations (and audience participation) for interventions such as massage, acupuncture, and yoga. Regardless of whether your audience is comprised of health consumers, administrators, MDs, PhDs, or nurses, always discuss the available science base behind the intervention—going more deeply for your audience of medical professionals.

Consider partnering with a local health-directed radio or TV show, or suitable print outlet, to help drive health consumers to your live events. There may be an opportunity for your center to sponsor a program or print piece, or for you to “buy media” (purchase time or space) for a reduced rate.

If you have in-house media capabilities, record the presentations and post them to your Web site and to social video channels such as YouTube and Vimeo.
Health consumers are hungry for information. Many want to learn as much as they can about their disease or condition and what they can do to address the root, systemic causes and/or symptoms.

While there are several trusted Web sites for consumers to get general medical information (e.g., cancer.gov, webmd.com, and mayoclinic.com), there are not as many resources available for evidence-based integrative interventions and natural products (e.g., nutraceuticals and botanicals) and their potential contraindications. This is your chance to be a “publisher”—to be the media—your opportunity to influence prospective integrative medicine health consumers with meaningful, compelling, valuable content. Marketing professionals refer to this as content marketing.

Content marketing for integrative medicine centers can be defined as follows:

Content marketing is the art and science of creating useful, relevant content and delivering that content in a consistent manner to current patients, prospective consumers, and medical professionals to educate them about your integrative services and products. Content marketing is not direct selling or pitching, but a powerful mode of influencing and educating through the dissemination of timely information. Done right, the creation and delivery of quality, valuable content engenders trust around your brand (center, clinic). Content marketing establishes thought leadership and clearly distinguishes your brand from others.

A properly designed and executed content marketing strategy will help you build trust with consumers because you are providing them with valuable content. When they are ready to schedule integrative medical services—as a preventative wellness measure or to address an existing health condition—they will think of your center because they trust your brand.
An effective, sustainable content marketing strategy includes many of the following types of content and delivery channels:

**Web**
Your Web site houses all the information necessary to tell your story. In addition, the content you create for your site, when optimized with keywords and tags, can help you increase traffic (i.e., attract more visitors) through organic search engine optimization.

**White Papers & E-Books**
White papers and E-books typically present a range of ideas, statistics, and examples around a core topic; ranging from 2,500-3,000 words in length, they are an effective way to show thought leadership and should be incorporated into your overall content strategy. Consumers want quality information they can trust, and free, downloadable white papers written by your center’s experts can leave a lasting impression.

**Video & Podcasts**
Capturing interviews, lectures, panel sessions, and demonstrations using multiple camera angles and quality audio gives you plenty of content to edit into multiple segments that can be used across several communication channels:
- **Videos**—Upload to your Web site, create a YouTube channel, post to Vimeo, and other health-oriented sites.
- **Audio**—Create podcasts to upload to your Web site and other health-oriented sites.

**Print**
Despite what you may have heard, print media is far from dead. A quality print product is just as powerful a tool to transmit information and engage readers today as it was a generation ago.

**Social Media**
Many centers are reluctant to take on the extra workload of managing an active social media presence. There are also concerns about HIPAA laws surrounding direct patient interactions. But done right, social media can be a terrific extension of your physical center and allows for the sharing of information and interaction where many of your patients (and prospective patients) spend a lot of their time—online.

Social media is a great platform to build community while sharing healthy tips and general advice. Today’s reality is that many of your patients and prospects are more likely to learn about your center on Facebook or Twitter, rather than by picking up your brochure or reading your e-newsletter.

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If you are committed to becoming a true content creator and disseminator, in short order you will have a bevy of posts, videos, news pieces, integrative medicine science updates, and all sorts of other interesting, self-created, relevant information to share with your audience.

Here are some basic rules to help frame your social media strategy:

- Make sure to post the standard disclaimer where possible (e.g., “All information contained on these pages is intended for informational and educational purposes. The information is not intended nor suited to be a replacement or substitute for professional medical treatment or for professional medical advice relative to a specific medical question or condition”).

- Never offer specific medical advice to an individual, even if an existing patient; the information provided in social media content for medical providers needs to be kept very general. You can send direct, private messages encouraging patients to call the office or make an appointment.

- Create social media policies and guidelines for employees. Clearly state the types of interactions allowed and disallowed. Patient privacy is priority number one; following a solid set of guidelines will help mitigate potential legal exposure.

- Commit to having one person manage your social media program; this might be a junior staffer who is social media savvy. Commit at least one hour of this person’s workday (30 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes toward the end of business day) to add information and monitor all activity (e.g., messages deemed sensitive on a Facebook wall will need to be removed quickly).

- Set up automatic feeds from your blog posts or manually link them to your social media pages.

- Share interesting information, programs, etc., about your center, but make sure to mention and link to other interesting health-oriented news and findings, as well. You should post at a ratio of at least 5:1 on outside news versus center news and your new content.

- “Listening” is as important as “speaking” take the time to answer as many @replies on Twitter and posts on Facebook as possible. Also set up “listening posts” by using Google Alerts, and regularly monitor/search social media sites for people and groups discussing your brand (center or clinic). Keep your fingers and eyes on the pulse of the conversations taking place!

These are the basics of content marketing and recommendations for several core content areas. If you believe that content creation and dissemination needs to be a part of your overarching development plan, there are other important factors to consider, in addition to setting a budget, such as:

- Database development
- Delivery channels
- Developing an effective content editorial production calendar
- And, most importantly, “marketing” the content—getting it out there!

Is a Custom Magazine Right For You?

If you’re already committed to creating content for your Web site, then much of the work required to produce a custom (aka, “branded”) magazine is already done. A significant portion of your existing content can be repurposed for a custom magazine.

You’ve seen custom magazines produced by local hospitals—some are published in-house, but more often than not they are outsourced. Some are quite good, while others read as typical advertorials. To avoid having a custom magazine sound like an ad, you have to provide truly useful content.

Done right, a custom magazine is a perfect medium to tell your center’s unique story, provide valuable health information, and educate readers about the integrative services you provide. The ideas and opportunities for content are endless.

Your first edition doesn’t have to be expensive—a 16 to 24-page format can work perfectly well. If a quarterly print magazine is viewed as too expensive (probably less expensive than you think) or laborious, then focus on your monthly e-newsletter and link back to the various content areas on your site.

Click to learn about Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center’s Web database on herbs, botanicals, supplements and their contraindications.

Click to learn about Mark Hyman, MD, a high profile functional medicine content creator—blog, video, books, high profile on TV, and experiential marketing (lectures).

Click to learn about Brian Lawenda, MD, a Radiation Oncologist and publisher of Integrative Oncology Essentials and Integrative Oncology Essentials: A Patient’s Guide.
The most practical place to start is with an integrative medicine services audit that will review your center and define clear next steps for your new or evolving brand.

Consumer behavior shows that integrative services are wanted and in demand, but the majority of providers aren’t differentiating themselves enough in the market to make a quality, sustainable impact—clearly, there is work to be done.

Although executing the recommendations in this paper have proven to work, the majority of medical institutions will need to garner executive level support across the board to make such changes. Since that might be the case for you, the most practical place to start is with an integrative medicine services audit that will review your center and define clear next steps for your new or evolving brand.

No matter where you begin, this 60-day plan shows that it is possible to move your integrative medicine center or practice into a position of sustainable, long-term profitability, and satisfy your patients for years to come.

References

About FON Therapeutics, Inc.

The Author
Glenn Sabin is a 20-year cancer “thriver” who created a comprehensive, integrative oncology approach to managing his disease—a protocol he closely follows today. A staunch proponent and leader in the area of integrative medicine, Glenn is a board member of the Society for Integrative Oncology and has a special interest in evidence-based integrative cancer care and the scientific exploration of whole systems protocols through well-designed clinical studies implemented in academic settings.

FON is not your typical marketing or business development firm.

The principals are experts in the business of integrative medicine. As an integrative oncology research incubator working with leading stakeholders and major U.S. cancer centers, we understand the business and science behind integrative clinical care.

We help evidence-based integrative medicine providers—large and small—grow by focusing on the things that matter most: your brand, clinic model, and unique positioning in the marketplace. From there we review every aspect of your content, marketing, messaging, and corporate strategy—and develop a cost-effective, results-oriented plan that is right for you.

Contact us today at 30@fontherapeutics.com or 301-384-2476 to schedule a complimentary 30-minute phone consultation to see if FON is a good match for your clinic and business development needs.

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