Authentic Conversations with Doctors

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Make Every Conversation Matter

We all recognize the need to have meaningful conversations with doctors about quality, safety and patient care. Equally important is the need to have consequential dialogue about referrals, partnerships and our futures together. While it’s easy to fall back on our own agendas, it’s far more valuable to take the time to define and craft a message that resonates with their aspirations. In short, to make our conversations matter more, we have to be prepared with a message that resonates.

We pride ourselves on being great communicators, but in the heat of the moment, it’s sometimes hard to draw on those skills. What sets the world’s greatest communicators apart is: They’re not only sure of what they want to say, they’re astute enough to read the situation, create an interest segue and adapt their message without missing a beat.

Are You Making Meaningful Connections?

How do you know if what you’re saying is resonating with the doctor? The best way to evaluate your effectiveness is to look at your conversational patterns. Most of us have been doing this for so long, we slip into our routine without giving it much thought. It may be time to assess not only what you’re saying, but how you’re saying it. As you consider these statements, think about your strengths and weaknesses (and how you might have more authentic conversations).

- When I’m with doctors, I generally spend ___% of the time talking and ___% listening.
- I often start my conversation with a succinct “reason to talk” and I ask about his or her agenda before beginning.
- I stage the conversation by reminding the doctor of a previous conversation on the topic and outcome.
- I find ways to connect with the physician on a personal level in at least half of my conversations.
- I have a consistent approach for shifting from social conversation to the business.
- I keep track of the topics that are of most interest to the doctor – both socially and from a business perspective.
- I have retired the question, “Anything I can do for you?” Instead I ask specific questions to learn more about their actual needs.
- I demonstrate genuine interest when I am in a conversation with a doctor. I do not look at my phone or get distracted.
- I actively involve them during the conversation by pausing, asking good questions and soliciting their opinions.
- During the conversation, I stay aware of the practice activity and watch the doctor’s body language to gauge when I should bring the meeting to a close.
- Do you have a mutually beneficial goal? If your goal is to share product information the answer is no.

A frequent discussion:

Doctors need to do a better job of communicating with their patients.
Could the same be said for how we communicate with doctors?
Remind Yourself What Really Matters

By now you’re likely thinking this is “pretty basic stuff.” You’re right. But if this stuff is so basic, why isn’t every conversation more authentic? We know it; we just don’t live by it. That’s why it’s so important to remind ourselves to focus on what really matters, to think consciously about what it takes to have a meaningful, authentic conversation.

1) Know your doctor before starting the conversation; in other words, genuinely get to know about them through data, their connections in your organization and review past visits. Part of being authentic in your conversation about their needs is being relevant.

2) Align your message with their concerns. Most doctors aren’t concerned about you or your need to boost referral numbers; they’re more concerned about what’s going on with them and how you can help improve the situation. When you come at a conversation focused on solving their problems, rather than achieving your goals, you’ll earn the respect of doctors. When you’re consistently focused on their best interest, you’ll earn their trust — the cornerstone of every authentic conversation.

3) Plan your approach in advance. Know what you want to say and where you want the conversation to go. At the same time, be ready to change course if the doctor wants to talk about something else. Your first objective, in every meeting, is to stay on track with the doctor’s needs. For example, a good way to start is, “Dr. Smith, I wanted to follow up on the employment questions you raised in our last meeting, but before I do, is there anything you want to make sure we discuss?”

4) Be clear and specific. Two-way communication is only as good as the reply that comes back. Ambiguity on your part triggers a brief reply from them. On the other hand asking a relevant and specific question launches a conversation. It also shows doctors that you respect their time. If you aren’t mindful of their time, if you don’t cut to the chase, busy doctors will tune you out well before you’ve said what you wanted to say.

5) Personalize your questions. Authentic experiences happen when you inspire someone to think on a human level. Rather than asking about a doctor’s experience with your facility’s cardiology, make your question patient-focused, “Have you had any patients treated in our EP lab in the last couple of weeks?” Or, “With such a large elderly population, have you seen an improvement in the recurrence of arterial fibrillation with the new procedure in our EP lab?” The same approach works if you are having a business conversation, “As you have thought about that next partner in the practice, does the addition of a Fellow or practicing physician make the most sense to you?”

6) Give your full attention. How many times in the last week have you started a conversation only to be interrupted by a cell phone? It’s an instant conversation stopper and immediate rapport breaker. When you’re working hard to develop a relationship with a doctor, give the conversation your undivided attention. If you’re serious about understanding and meeting a doctor’s needs then no email is worth the disruption or show of disrespect.

7) Be real. Surely, that seems obvious, but nothing is more destructive to a relationship than coming off as “aloof” or delivering a message that sounds “canned” or “contrived.” If your personalities don’t mesh or, for any reason, you can’t authentically engage in conversation, enlist someone in your organization to help out. If it doesn’t feel real to you, it’ll show.

8) Be open, empathetic and engaged. Be open to other peoples’ opinions and willing to step in their shoes. Astute communicators know there is far more to be gained by listening when you’re inclined to turn up the rhetoric. Keeping conversation rolling requires that you pay attention, empathize and trust your own intuition. Your goal is to become someone people look forward to seeing, whether it’s because they feel better for the interaction, learn something or come away feeling inspired.
9) **Be timely.** The painful challenge of leaving enough time in your schedule so that you arrive and depart on time is a true sign of respect- or dis-respect. As well, we show respect when we offer timely follow up for the information they share. Consistent messages back from those involved in an issue to say, “We heard you” demonstrates a spirit of responsiveness that should happen in all conversations with those who help our organizations by sharing their perceptions of what works and does not.

If you’re not making those kinds of authentic connections, take notes on your past exchanges, study your “normal conversation patterns” and see what’s happening. For example, if the doctor has seen you as someone who stops in, asks how things are going and thanks them, you may need to work hard to establish a new pattern.

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**Mastering Authentic Conversations Is a Lifelong Pursuit**

When you review this list, likely you’ll see many of these tips are already part of your routine. However, watching great communicators, writing scripts, spending a little extra time on your upfront messaging, can make your conversations with doctors matter that much more. In the end, the key is to remember that it’s not about you, your opinion or referral numbers. Having meaningful conversations with doctors is about them, what they need and how you can add value to their world.

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