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REFERRAL RELATIONSHIPS

3 relationships to nurture to gain, and maintain, your ideal client base

The math is easy. The health of any home health agency depends on the number of referrals that are received.

In order to claim and maintain referrals, it is first important to develop a fundamental understanding of your business and outline your goals. Medicare explains the purpose and benefits of home health care to patients in a way that is clear and understandable. "Home health care is usually less expensive, more convenient, and just as effective as care you get in a hospital or skilled nursing facility," according to medicare.gov. This assertion is true for Medicare-associated agencies as well as other skilled home care service organizations.

So, the question becomes, how does a home health agency distinguish itself from the competition? How do you earn those coveted referrals?

Start with your relationships. Take a look at your relationship with your critical referring doctors, social workers, facilities and community groups, as well as your relationship with technology and with your clients.

1 What is your relationship with referrers?

The first step to more referrals is to develop good, trusted relationships with health care providers who refer. Creating and maintaining relationships takes time and patience.

As any home health business owner knows, physicians are often the first group professionals reach out to when contacting potential referrers. In person meetings provide the best chance to get to know doctors who could refer to your company, but securing that meeting can be difficult.

Developing relationships with the physician's staff can help you make inroads. Staff can help you



Home health service groups first rose to prominence in the U.S. in the 1880s.

- National Association for Home Care & Hospice



In the U.S., the rate of home health care use for women aged 65 and over was 55 percent higher than the rate for men.

- National Health Statistics Reports, Centers for Disease Control



About 1 in 3 people caring for someone at home (as opposed to a nursing home), said they had hired paid help in the past year.

- AARP Public Policy Institute and National Alliance for Caregiving



Experts predict that approximately 1.3 million additional jobs in this field will be added in the U.S. through 2020, and the number of jobs will grow 38 percent through 2024.

- Bureau of Labor Statistics.



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secure a quick meeting, but then it is up to you. Have your elevator speech ready. Practice before you go. And make sure you have professional leave-behind information in the form of brochures, business cards and/or other pertinent literature.

When you formulate your pitch about your services and create your marketing materials, think about how your business can help the physicians to whom you are talking. If you can show that your agency responds quickly and can lower the number of patient readmissions, you will get their attention. Mention the things that set you apart in the marketplace—whether it is specially trained staff, technology or an ability to handle difficult cases.

Hospital social workers/discharge planners can be an invaluable source of information and referrals. Pharmaceutical representatives sometimes make presentations to discharge planners—or physicians, nurses, etc. Home care agencies can partner with those companies to participate alongside the pharma rep. This provides a chance to get to know the planners and to tout your services in a short presentation. You can share the costs of the event with the pharmaceutical company, making this a cost-efficient promotional opportunity.

Talking to people one-on-one about your company is always best, but talking to a group of influencers can be just as impactful. Speaking engagements are proven relationship-builders. Think about who your clients are and where your customer base is located. Volunteer with local senior centers or nearby churches to solicit speaking invitations. When you have a chance to talk, do not focus only on your business. This is a chance to present yourself as a community



leader in your industry. Select a topic helpful to your listeners—home safety following surgery, for example—so your audience will get to know you and see your range of knowledge.

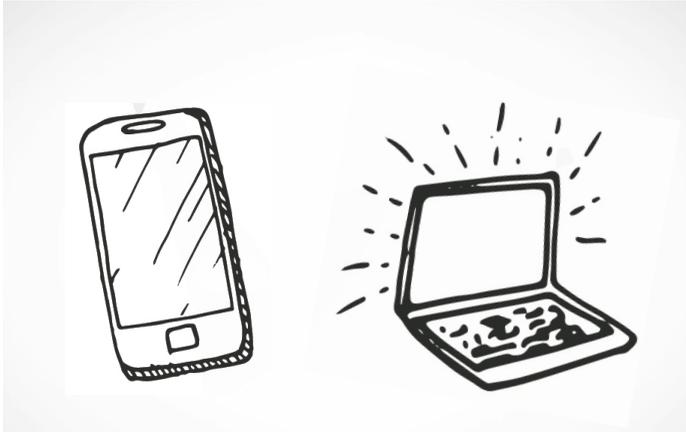
Networking with members of community agencies further build relationships. Join the area Agency on Aging and the Chamber of Commerce, speak to civic groups or at library lunch-and-learns. Every opportunity to get to know someone is an opportunity to earn more referrals for your business.

If you do not already know the people in your community, you are at a disadvantage. Get out there! The time you spend cultivating these relationships can change the direction of your business.

2 What is your relationship with technology?
As the world has moved into the digital age, so has the home care market. Some agencies understand better than others the crucial role



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technology plays in growing and serving their client base. Health care professionals prefer to refer to companies that achieve the best patient outcomes, and technology continues to contribute to those kinds of success.

Data has always played a crucial role in health care, including the care that has taken place in the home. Temperatures are recorded, along with other vital signs. Lab work and other test information is available. Care plans are outlined. Those providing care or administering medications make a note of their actions and observations.

With the use of mobile phones or tablet devices to record patient information, home care agencies bring themselves into the 21st century. Caregivers can stand at a bedside and instantly add information to a patient's file—information that is then available to the entire care team. Today, rather than relying on a

bed-side chart, notes are submitted to a digital system that allows caregivers to determine trends and predict outcomes.

Other advancements are available that can help your business perform at its best. Personal Emergency Response Systems (PERS) are a proven technology that can secure attention for patients and quickly address issues before a readmission is necessary. In fact, studies find that monitored PERS reduce mortality rates by up to 75 percent and reduce rehospitalization by up to 59 percent. By providing patients with a PERS unit, agencies secure better peace of mind for both physicians and families.

While typical PERS units offer alerts that increase reaction time, there are some new technologies on the market that can accelerate and customize PERS alerts. The [CareCaller™](#), for instance, includes an added feature: the ability to text or call family members as well as home health agencies. Two-way voice communication from the wearable pendant is an added bonus for who are evaluating the reason for the call. The devices include a built-in fall detector as well as built-in GPS locator. Devices like these provide better outcomes for patients and fewer readmissions.

Beyond equipping your team with the best technology, you can also use the digital landscape to promote your business. An easy-to-navigate website that is clearly designed and attractive is no longer a nice addition to your business, it is a requirement. To test the website's usability, ask friends and family to visit and make suggestions. Chances are errors or

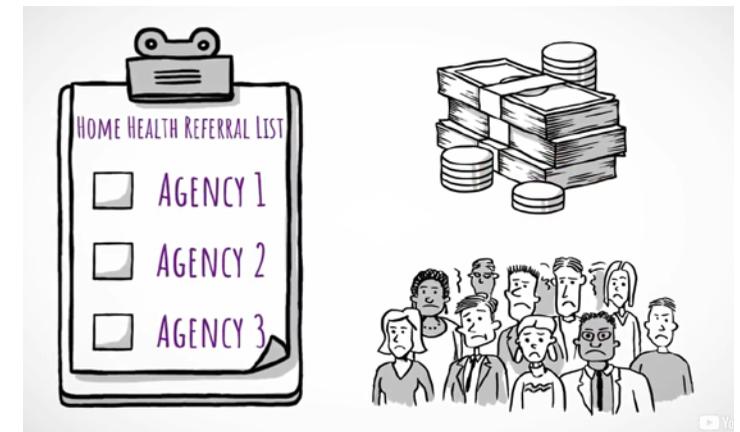
glitches will be found that you were not aware of before enlisting their help. There are several ways to increase the performance of your website.

- **Update content frequently.**
- **Tag words for Search Engine Optimization (SEO).**
- **Provide up to date contact information.**

Social media is another tool agencies can use to garner referrals. A presence on Facebook and LinkedIn can be particularly helpful to home care businesses. And, of course, joining referral and service matching networks are a good idea. If you are thorough at promoting yourself online, then someone searches in your area, your name will be at the top of the list.

3 What is your relationship with your clients?

All the referrals in the world along with the





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The key to the ongoing success of any home care agency is hiring the right staff members

best website and technology will not carry your business long-term. Your company must provide exemplary care to your clients. Therefore, efficient and caring staff are vital to the ongoing success of any home care agency. As the population ages and the health care industry becomes more uncertain, there are more home patients to care for, and, more opportunities for home care services.

As the market continues to grow, so will the competition. The key to the ongoing success of any home care agency is hiring the right staff members. Patient retention and word-of-mouth endorsements are sometimes overlooked pillars of patient referral. A staff that makes a good impression, performs in a professional manner, and maintains relationships with family and other caregivers is a staff that will secure future clients.

With any business, relationships can make or break viability. Home health care is no different. Here are some industry specific suggestions about how to enhance client relationships and forge long-lasting relationships:

- **Provide excellent care.** This should be obvious, as that is what you have been hired

to do. Following the care plan is the very minimum of what is expected. Exceeding expectations with empathetic staff that goes the extra mile will earn your company a valued reputation.

- **Encourage ongoing training.** Engaged employees are better employees. Those who are learning on-the-job and receiving continuing education will not only be excited about their work, they will provide better care.
- **Be organized.** This is where technology can assist your team. Human resources software can keep assignments straight and on schedule. It can also track your team's efficiency. But remember, just because a home visit is fast does not automatically mean that it is efficient. Taking care of the details of each assignment and accurately recording them where data can be communicated to other caregivers is essential.
- **Operate with integrity.** Your clients are in your community, and your reputation will proceed your business. Be honest with referrers, clients and staff. Pay your bills and payroll on time. Become active in your

community so people get to know you and you get to know them. When a mistake is made—and there will be—correct it as quickly as possible, find the root cause and apologize to those affected.

- **Respond quickly.** Answer questions and clear up issues when they arise. If you have set a deadline for reports, make the deadline. Be available to help family members interpret medical and care information. Yes, you are operating a business, but it is a business about people.

Conclusion

There is much at stake in the competitive home care industry. Business owners can better their chances for success by evaluating their company's strengths and then building a marketing plan to promote them. But first, they should take a look at their relationships.

Building and maintaining meaningful relationships among care and technology providers, community leaders and clients is the most important thing you can do for your business.

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