

ENTERPRISE CONFERENCE

How to boost business

Consultants, GPs and their staff enjoyed useful business tips at a private practice and enterprise course. **Robin Stride** reports

A BUSINESS GURU has warned doctors to beware of the timidity trap that often makes things far worse for recession-hit firms.

Prof Russell Smith, author of *How to Start a Successful Business*, urged consultants and private GPs to ensure that they carried on marketing.

He told a private practice and enterprise workshop at the Royal Society of Medicine, London: 'At times like these, the first thing people cut back on is marketing – which is bonkers.'

Prof Smith, chief executive of Business Boffins Ltd, warned that doctors in private practice were probably missing opportunities if they were not investing a substantial amount in marketing. Here is a round-up of his other advice:

Banks

It is not 1955 anymore. You don't need to go cap in hand and say 'Please, will you lend me money?' The banks are there to sell you something. If you don't like your bank or they are not doing what you need, change them now.

Credit cards

10% of new businesses are funded by credit cards. Have a credit card for your business with £10k on it. You do not have to use it but you always have to be able to access cash when you need it. It can be much easier to get credit on a card than from a bank.

Lease

Don't have your precious money tied up in 'stuff'. You need cash to do things. So lease equipment.

Part time

Don't fall into the trap of thinking you need full-time people.

You can have part-time staff for a lot of duties.

Use others

Consider the possibilities of creating a business where you can train or get others in to run it – so you have freedom to do other things.

Think like an investor

Doctors need to think like an investor if they want business success. Prof Smith said they had to get away from the attitude that they were employees. They were in business to make a profit.

You sell things when your product solves a problem for the customer. You may be content to have an income but you may also want to build up a business you can sell. Entrepreneurial business people do not close down businesses, they sell them.

So think about the opportunity to sell the business you are creating. 'You never build a house and then, when the times come to leave it, throw it away. You sell it, don't you? The same should apply to your business'.

Tax

Minimise tax with a good accountant. They would save more money than they cost. And contract PAYE out. He said PAYE services cost less than £10 a month per person including payslips.

Branding

Think about your unique selling proposition. Be clear about getting this message down and across to the target group and decide how best to build your brand.

Customers' perception was vital and having a good website and documentation were very important. It was 'absolutely critical' to



The consultant team at 108 Harley Street, used during the conference as a case study on how to go about marketing your brand image

get the branding right and doctors needed to think hard about it.

Prof Smith praised the marketing quality of 108 Harley Street, showing how it had co-ordinated its website with publicity material for its services – The London Breast Clinic, 108 X-Ray and Imaging, The Gilmore Groin & Hernia Clinic, The One Stop Day Surgery Centre, The London Thyroid Clinic and The London Rectal Clinic.

Using a photograph of the doctors (see above), he asked workshop members what messages it gave them. They came back with

'team', 'multiple opinions', 'reducing risk' and 'continuity of service'.

Prof Smith thought the image showed 'depth' and the brochure and newsletter were an example of branding that doctors starting out in private practice should aim for.

He suggested doctors developed their own key messages and presented these to the design team. Nobody knew the business better than they did.

The course was led by consultant plastic surgeon Mr Ash Mosahebi, who has an MBA from Warwick Business School.

Review fees regularly for PMI patients

INDEPENDENT PRACTITIONERS should review the fees they charge for insured patients on a regular basis or they could lose out, a billings expert said.

Gary Chapman, general manager at Medical Billing & Collection, said the fees insurers paid could sometimes go up without doctors being informed.

He recommended fee reviews on a regular basis. And he suggested doctors charged 50% of the fee for 'Did Not Attend' patients. Some doctors charged 100%.

Mr Chapman, whose company has been offering *Independent Practitioner Today* readers a free billing audit at www.medbc.co.uk, warned the conference to be aware of embassy and medico-legal work, where payment terms of 270 days were not unusual.

The firm had helped doctors get back 'tens or hundreds of thousands of pounds owed' – sometimes going back years.

He left doctors with some key tips to help them ensure they got paid (see box).

GET YOUR MONEY

- Raise the invoice as soon as possible
- Aim for regular, weekly cash flow
- Make sure it is correct and accepted first time
- Chase the payment as soon as it is due
- Understand insurance policies
- Recognise that only constant chasing achieves results
- Know when to write something off