

FEATURE

Something for Nothing, But Not for Naught

By Mick Bates, PT, CCM

Executive Summary

Offering a complimentary consultation can help you convert inquiries to clients and increase market share, while simultaneously enhancing customer satisfaction and building community awareness of the role of physical therapy.

The health care arena and practice of physical therapy have become increasingly complex. Physical therapists can provide a simple cost-effective solution for multiple musculoskeletal problems for the community. Unfortunately, we often make

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it hard for people to see us and *sample* what we have to offer owing to all kinds of barriers—some real, some perceived. Even in direct-access states, insurance regulations may require a prescription or referral for physical therapy for evaluation, which can delay treatment and add costs like medical visits and unnecessary diagnostic tests.

Complicating these issues are the extensive rules and regulations of different insurance carriers. These guidelines and terms need to be determined, communicated, and agreed to by the client before we can even begin treat-

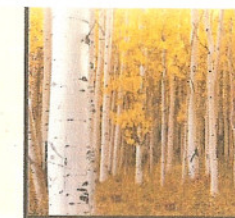
ment. Patients and therapists often jump through these hoops for a patient who may be treated only for a single or a few visits, or may reschedule or not show up at all for an appointment. All this upfront work can often lead to waiting at least a week and navigating administrative hassles just for an initial evaluation.

This certainly isn't cost-effective or customer-focused; however, we do it anyway. We do it out of habit, failing ourselves, our businesses, and our patients, and preventing our profession from making physical therapy the clear solution for the client's problem. It's time for a better strategy. I recommend something that we have been doing in my practice for the past two years with considerable success, which is offering "a complimentary consultation."

We all like something for nothing, don't we? I will give fifteen minutes of my time to anyone who needs help. That's why I became a physical therapist in the first place. So, I give thirty minutes of my staff's time to people who are likely to become paying customers. In this consultation, my staff and I will be able to sell them on physical therapy and what we can do for them.

Here is how this works in our offices. All new appointments are scheduled as "complimentary consultations." These are immediately put in any open slot on the schedule, filling unproductive time created by cancellations or no-shows. We get the basic information of how can we help them, how they heard about us, contact information, and primary insurance. We inform callers or walk-ins that all patients are initially seen for a consultation at no charge so we can determine whether and how we can best help them. Everyone really likes that part!

When the client arrives for the free consultation, we use an intake form to gather client contact details, insurance, physician referral, or medical records information. The physical therapist "consults with" the patient, performs a basic systems review and examination of the primary



impairment (if appropriate), and provides an overview of the treatment plan we might recommend following evaluation. Patients appreciate having their clinical needs made a priority over financial/reimbursement considerations.

At the end of this visit, the clinician and client determine an evaluation and treatment schedule that makes sense based on the clinical presentation and other considerations regarding work or family commitments. While the clinician consults with the patient, our billing staff verifies insurance. Then, billing meets with the client to explain coverage and financial obligations. If a referral is needed, we contact the primary care provider or referral source or suggest a quality provider who can supply it in a timely manner. Before they leave, we give clients an orientation to the facility and clinical paperwork (releases for medical records, etc.) to take home and complete. When they return, they check in with the billing staff, make any required copayment, and then get started with evaluation and treatment. Simple, right?

Like any solution, this free consultation strategy doesn't work for every case and can be easily adjusted with the patient's needs in mind. For example, the process can be streamlined depending on their presentation, and changes in coverage can be "flipped" from a consultation to evaluation at the discretion of the clinician. Post-op or acutely injured workers can also be "flipped" as needed. Sometimes we give a little "free treatment" on the first visit until we can get the required information, authorization, or other details to process a clean claim.

That is our complimentary consultation solution in a nutshell. The client is in and out in a half hour, all the paperwork is out of the way, we generate a clean claim, and the client leaves happy and is not only likely to return, but is also likely to recommend us to other people! A free consultation *starts* as something for nothing and transforms into something good for everyone. It has worked well for us, and could work for you, too! ■

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