

What should you call your practice?

The sign you hang for your group should be distinct and accurate.
A good name can be an effective marketing tool to attract patients.

What you call it makes a difference. Physicians increasingly are looking at what they name their practices and considering options that will get more attention from patients who control how health care dollars are spent.

Physicians traditionally don't go in for creative names, often naming practices after locations, specialties or physician owners. That's OK, some experts say. **Physicians are beginning to market their businesses in a more traditional corporate sense, said, Rudy Svezia, president and founder of DocGrow, (www.docgrow.com) the medical marketing arm of advertising agency Verex Marketing, Englewood, N.J.**

A name change isn't going to work miracles for a practice, Svezia said. "In and of itself, it's not going to bring patients to the door. It has to be supported with a marketing effort. It doesn't matter what your name is unless you make an effort to brand your name."

Branding efforts, include advertising and public relations. "You have to create a theme that is understandable," Svezia said. "One of our ads said 'Our primary care doctors keep minor problems from becoming major problems.' That says preventative medicine is a good idea. Come on in. Ford Motor Co. They make motor cars. But when you say 'Integrity is job one,' you're saying something about Ford Motor Co. or its products."

What's this gonna cost? Companies can charge hundreds of thousands of dollars to come up with a name and logo. It was always a business, but finally because of the payment constraints by the HMOs, doctors have become more keenly aware of where their money comes from, how much they get paid and what their potential income will be for the services that they render," he said. "They have become overtly aware that they need to market their practices in order to capture patients and sustain the kind of income levels they want. A name that has some marketing cachet attached to it is very important.

But not every change has to be expensive. Page-Campbell Cardiology in Nashville, Tenn., had been Cardiology Consultants until the 13-physician group noticed that there were several similarly named practices in the area. Their name change came in 1995, more than two decades after Harry L. Page Jr., MD, and now-retired W. Barton Campbell, MD, two prominent cardiologists, founded the practice.

"Cardiology Consultants is actually pretty generic. That didn't mean anything to anybody," said the practice's administrator Mary Royer. "We wanted something unique and wanted to honor the two founders of the group. We started to understand from the market that people did not know who we were by that name, but they did know Harry Page and Bart Campbell. "When the times were good, there were lots of patients to go around and it didn't make a lot of difference. We didn't stop to think about it," she said. "But as more competition popped up ..."

The practice generated its own letterhead, so there was no significant cost connected with the change. And it changed the name when telephone service and insurer contracts came up. "It was a lot of paperwork, but no real hassle," Royer said. On the flip side, Yale Medical Group got professional help when it changed its name from Yale Faculty Practice about a year ago. The group consists of about 1,300 full-time faculty of the Yale School of Medicine who also were the full-time attending staff of the Yale-New Haven Hospital.

Focus groups of patients told them they didn't know what "faculty practice" meant. Many thought it was a place where doctors in training practice. "We discovered that the term faculty practice is a meaningless term to patients and may in fact be harmful to the health of the practice," said David J. Leffell, MD, director of the group. "They didn't understand it was an academic medical center." The group's situation was complicated by its association with Yale-New Haven Hospital, which had a large community attending staff that also used the Yale title but are not full-time faculty at the school.

The group wanted to establish the full-time faculty in the mind of the public and to take advantage of the Yale brand name, Dr. Leffell said. "We wanted to ensure that the public understood that this is where they come to get expert academic medical care. We have a hospital we're affiliated with that uses our name. We're an entity of the school of medicine, and we had to find a way to let the public know that."

Cost for a five- to six-doctor group would be about \$10,000 to \$25,000 to analyze an existing name, look at options and develop support graphics and implement a change, he said. For a 25- to 50-doctor group, the cost might be about \$35,000 but depends on the structure. It's cheaper to leave most decisions to a committee, Collins said, adding that the more presentations that need to be made, the more costly services would be.