

How to Plan an



An open house can help you attract new patients and retain existing ones.
Here's how to pull it off in five simple steps.

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Last winter, after relocating our office from Mount Laurel, N.J., to the nearby town of Hainesport, N.J., my colleagues and I unveiled our new medical facility at an open house for our new community. We invited thousands of existing and prospective patients to tour our state-of-the-art facility. We wanted to show off the hard work we had invested in selecting the office location, designing the floor plan and decorating the interior. We owed it to ourselves, to our loyal patients and to the community to open up our office and display our venture.

Although we were excited about our event, it required a good deal of preparation (about 40 hours over three months), from designing flyers and advertisements to turning our medical office into an entertainment venue by replacing waiting room chairs and magazine racks with tables of food and balloons. Ultimately, all of our efforts paid off when new patients showed up for office visits only days after our open house. To date, approximately 30 new patients have scheduled appointments with our office after attending the open house.

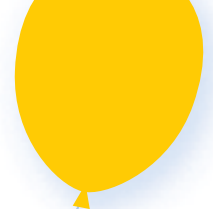
Relocating your practice is not the only event that calls for an open house. Purchasing a laser for cosmetic sur-

gery, celebrating a 10th anniversary in practice and adding a new physician are just a few good reasons to host an open house. Once you have your reason, here's what you should do to ensure that your open house is a success.

Step 1: Identify your audience

Determining the target audience for your open house should be your first priority. We chose to invite approximately 4,500 households – all the households in the Hainesport region, plus our existing patients. Approximately 5 percent of our patients attended, plus 75 people from outside our practice. Consider the purpose of your open house, and tailor the guest list to fit what you're promoting. If you are featuring new night and weekend office hours in your practice, send invitations to the "9 to 5" workers of local businesses and office complexes. Hiring a new physician with an interest in sports medicine could be a great opportunity to target local sports teams, private gyms and school coaches for your open house.

I would also advise including local dignitaries and organizational leaders on your list of invitees to introduce



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your practice to well-known people in your area. Through word of mouth, your practice may benefit from impressing involved community figures as well as local families.

Step 2: Create a budget

Before you pull out the vacuum and dust off the blinds, you'll want to create a budget. We spent \$2,500 on our event. The table on page 52 provides a list of costs for a sample open house with 3,000 invitees and an expected attendance rate of 5 percent, which is a reasonable maximum to expect.

Each facet of an open house (e.g., postage, food, advertising and giveaway items) carries a cost that your practice will have to absorb. You may even need to budget to pay staff for extra hours; however, our staff volunteered their time. Because we held the event outside of our normal business hours, it did not affect our office revenue stream.

Our practice mailed about 4,500 invitations, which was our largest single expense, followed by food and drink expenses. We also budgeted money for giveaway items such as magnets, pens and water bottles with the practice's name, address and phone number to promote our practice.

To locate a company that customizes giveaway items, go to your favorite Internet search engine and type the word "promotional" followed by the name of the specific item into the search box (e.g., "promotional pens"). Look at a few different sites to get a good idea of how many and what kind of items your practice can afford. Keep in mind that if you

have extra items once the open house ends, you can give them to new patients.

Step 3: Choose the date and time

Every open house should offer guests a window of time to drop in and visit. A two- to three-hour window enables patients to visit your office at their leisure. Weekends, late afternoons and early evenings after normal business hours are good times to choose for an open house because fewer people will have conflicts with work. We selected late afternoon and early evening on a weekday for our event. When choosing a date, take your climate into consideration. Don't gamble on a date during peak blizzard season, for example. Choose a month that tends to have milder weather.

Step 4: Advertise

To get people through the door, you must advertise effectively. Ads can be designed as

■ Hosting an open house is an opportunity for your practice to show off a new facility, introduce a new physician or promote a new service.

■ Create a budget to determine how much your practice can spend on advertising, food and giveaway items.

■ Effective advertising is key to getting people through the door so you can show them what your practice has to offer.

COMMON QUESTIONS TO EXPECT AT YOUR OPEN HOUSE

You and your staff should be prepared for patients to ask you the following questions at your open house:

- Do you see children and adults?
- What are your hours?
- What is the waiting time for an appointment (for both well and sick visits)?
- What insurance plans do you accept?
- Will I be able to reach the doctor after hours?
- Who takes care of your patients when you are on vacation?
- Which hospitals do you use?

About the Author

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SAMPLE BUDGET FOR AN OPEN HOUSE

Invitees: 3,000

Expected attendance: 150 (5%)

Food & beverages	
Vegetable tray	\$75
Fruit tray	\$75
Small sandwiches	\$130
Pastries	\$40
Cheese and meat trays	\$70
Hot appetizers	\$105
Soda	\$40
Coffee and tea	\$30
Cups, plates, utensils and napkins	\$30
Miscellaneous expenses	
Balloons and flowers	\$125
Newspaper advertisements	\$150
Flyer advertisements	\$30
Postage	\$790
Folding tables	\$45
Tablecloths	\$15
Giveaways	
Water bottles	\$55 (100 @ \$0.55/each)
Magnetic business cards	\$125 (500 @ \$0.25/each)
Pens	\$70 (1,000 @ \$0.07/each)
Total	\$2,000

flyers or placed in local newspapers. If you advertise in a newspaper, request that the ad run one or two weeks prior to the event. You should also post signs in your office to draw patients' interest. Let them know they are welcome to bring family and friends.

Your ads should clearly outline the reasons for giving the open house and the benefits of attending. Include a map and written directions to your practice so people can find it easily. Make sure the ads promote any giveaways, health care screenings or food your office will be providing at the event. For example, we made certain our ads mentioned that we would be offering blood pressure, glucose and body fat analysis screenings.

When preparing a mailing, use your existing database of addresses to print labels for invitations. You can save money by using bulk mail and postcards rather than envelopes. To reach people beyond your existing patients,

look in the phone book under "mailing lists" for companies that sell consumer mailing lists based on criteria such as geography, income, age or marital status. Compare quotes, examine services and review recommendations for the mailing list services before you buy.

Advertising shouldn't stop once your guests have arrived. Develop a brochure to distribute with your practice's mission statement, history, facility information, and a listing of providers and staff. If your practice offers any procedures or special services, list them in the brochure as well. Don't forget to include the office's address, phone number and hours of operation. A well-constructed brochure will answer any questions new and existing patients may have after the open house.

Step 5: Get ready, get set ... go!

A few days before the event, prepare your staff for their functions and roles. They should know how they will assist with any medical screenings you'll be offering and how to answer common questions about your practice (see the list of "must-know" questions on page 51). It may help to make copies of the floor plan of your office and mark where you would like staff to be stationed.

Once the event commences, mingle with the guests. Take a few moments shortly after your open house begins to introduce yourself and your staff, describe your practice and thank everyone for attending. We bought a large pair of scissors and had an official ribbon cutting ceremony with some short speeches and toasts from our physicians and even our mayor.

Be a good host and thank each and every person who attends your event. We had more than 200 people attend our open house, and we thanked all of them for making it a success.

The payoff

An open house provides an excellent opportunity to grow your business and gain recognition, but those aren't the only benefits. As busy doctors, we have few precious moments with our patients during the day. An open house gives you the chance to have some fun, reveal your personality and make new and prospective patients feel at home. **FPM**

Send comments to fpmedit@aafp.org.