

Excel Physical Therapy growing as patients seek preventive care

by **Tiffany Gann**

Positioning itself to combat rising health care costs, Excel Physical Therapy has experienced a steady rise in volume of clients seeking early intervention of orthopedic injuries.

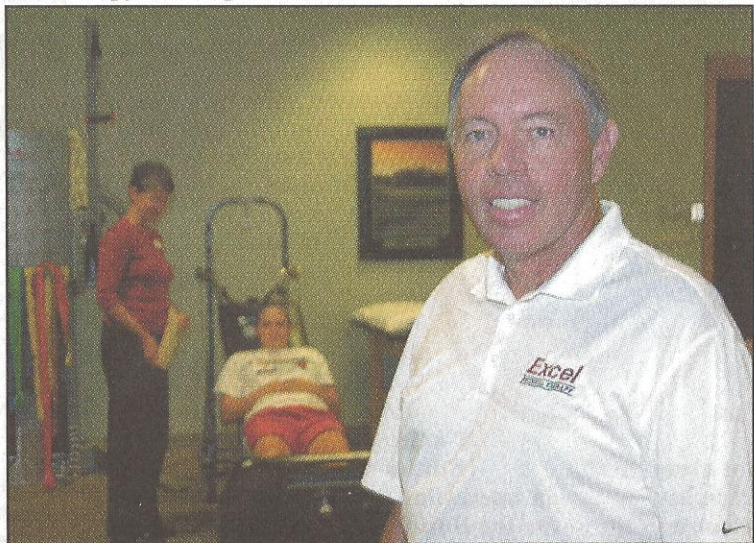
With 12 locations in Omaha, Council Bluffs, Fremont, Columbus and Grand Island, Excel Physical Therapy has implemented a

consumer-based marketing strategy to cater to the availability of choices to patients.

Rather than relying solely on referrals, advertisements have directly targeted the consumer — a method not traditionally utilized in the health care industry.

President and CEO Mike Berlin and Vice President Neal Wachholtz

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President and CEO Mike Berlin ... Utilizing consumer-driven marketing to present choices for the average orthopedic injury.

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head the private physical therapy practice, which was established by Berlin in 1988.

"We have grown in terms of volume of patients seen in existing clinics over the last three years," Berlin said, "which really led to adding additional therapists."

Total patient visits have topped 15 percent over the past couple years, for the practice that employs 91 — 40 of which are licensed physical therapists.

Although Excel is focused on the consumer, it still maintains a growing client base from doctor referrals.

"Our communication with physicians is good so that when people do choose to come and see us, our referral base is very wide," Wachholtz said. "We're still providing updates to the physician to keep them informed on what's going on."

Berlin also indicated that the private practice plans to continue to build upon its existing locations; a promising move as the practice has clinics well interspersed throughout the Greater Omaha area.

While coverage of the metro area is no problem for Excel Physical Therapy, navigating obstacles in the health care industry has kept the practice on its toes in regards to finding new ways to market its business to struggling insurance holders.

"More of the payment of health care services is coming out of the patient's pocket than it used to," Berlin said.

Because of financial reasons, it is more common for an individual to try to "tough it out" in regards to common minor injuries like

sprains — but the result may turn into chronic pain down the road.

By educating consumers on the benefits of early intervention, such as prevention of serious surgical procedures, Excel Physical Therapy hopes to combat concerns of rising premiums and deductibles.

"Six weeks of physical therapy costs way less than surgery or a year of prescription medication," he said.

Excel also participates in community events like the Omaha Health, Wellness and Fitness Expo.

"We're always out there with employers and people, and continually educating what physical therapy is," he said.

In fact, Excel is so focused on education,

that the practice has started a scholarship program for high school students interested in pursuing physical therapy as a career.

Thus far, it has rewarded 20 scholarships of \$1,000 to students in the last three years.

Berlin was inspired by his hometown's physical therapist who paid a visit to his high school science class — he later became that inspirational PT to Wachholtz who was a high school athlete.

Another demographic Excel is increasingly focusing on is that of the active, aging population.

"We have people in here in their 70s because their bad knee is screwing up their golf game," Berlin said.

Berlin noted a gradual increase in the aging population as they are fighting aches and pains while maintaining active lifestyles.

"The profile of the aging person has really changed, they're more active, they're still

employed and they want to stay active," he said. "We're seeing a gradual increase in use of therapy in that population."

Yet, the retired population is only one fraction of the array of patients that walk through Excel's doors.

"It ranges anywhere from the minor injury to people that have had major surgery, knee replacement, ligament reconstruction and shoulder surgery," Wachholtz said.

A common athlete injury Excel PT's see is the tearing of the ACL or anterior cruciate ligament.

Additionally, Excel has another subset of employer assistance where a physical therapist will visit a workplace to examine workers.

"We're involved in doing a lot of preventive things for employers as well," Berlin said. "We screen employees to see if they're fit for the job."

Those specialty services are geared toward prevention and treatment of work-related injuries, Wachholtz said.

With several elements included in the practice, Excel Physical Therapy plans to continue to build upon the local community and expand on the basis of need.

"We really don't have interest in being regional or national, but if there's an opportunity to provide services, and make a good business run of it in some other market, we'll certainly consider that," Berlin said.

Excel Physical Therapy

Phone: 402-330-8433

Address: 2403 South 133rd Plaza, Omaha 68144 (corporate office)

Service: physical therapy

Founded: 1988 by Mike Berlin

Employees: 91 (40 physical therapists)

Goal: Continue consumer-based marketing efforts in the Greater Omaha area.

Industry outlook: As health care costs continue to rise, consumers are looking to save money.

Website: www.excelpt.com