Open house highlights
ASC’s impact

At the FASA meeting in New Orleans in May, speakers from outside the health care field struck a common chord: ASCs have a great story to tell, one that combines cost-effective care with excellent outcomes. Speakers encouraged attendees to tell their story to politicians, legislatures, and the general public.

One effective storytelling technique is to throw open the ASC’s doors and welcome the community. FASA has declared Aug 15 as National ASC Open House Day. Even if you aren’t planning an open house for August, consider including one in your future marketing plans.

**Why have an open house?**

Open houses eat up time and effort in an already hectic schedule, so why do them? FASA chair Allen Hecht says, “Open houses are a way of providing firsthand knowledge of ASCs and how they are a powerful tool in meeting America’s surgical needs.” FASA President Kathy Bryant adds, “Open houses give individual ASCs an opportunity to demonstrate the range of services and top-quality patient care they provide to the people in their communities.”

Lynne Oliver, RN, MBHCA, administrator of Bellingham Surgery Center in Bellingham, Washington, agrees with Hecht and Bryant and sees open houses as a way of expanding the center’s reach, “Some people attended who wouldn’t have come otherwise, ones who didn’t know about surgery centers.”

**How often should an open house be held?**

Frequency varies. Some ASCs, like Northwest Michigan Surgery Center in Traverse City, Michigan, hold annual events. Tina Piotrowski, RN, BSN, CGRN, clinical director, says the center started the open house 3 years ago when it first opened. The Surgery Center at Cranberry in Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania, also holds an annual event, says Mary Beth Doutt, RN, facility administrator.

Other ASCs tie the open house to a special occasion. Bellingham Surgery Center’s open house in 2006 coincided with its 20th anniversary. Other special events might include the addition of a new service or physician group.

Time of year may be a factor. Doutt’s center is planning this year’s open house for the fall, when they feel attendance is better.

No matter how often an open house is held, planning is key. FASA has made the process easier by developing a tool kit that walks you through the process (sidebar). Depending on the size of your facility, start planning 3 to 4 months ahead and be sure to keep notes for the next event.

**Marketing and more**

Identify people in the community who would benefit from your open house. Examples include community groups such as senior citizens centers, religious organizations, and the YMCA/YWCA; local chapters of disease groups such as the American Diabetes Association; service organizations such as the Lions Club; government officials, retired employees and physicians; and other physicians and their staffs to encourage referrals.

Offering health screening is an ideal way to boost attendance. The Surgery Center at Cranberry is primarily an eye center, so Doutt offered glaucoma and cataract
screening in addition to general screening such as blood pressure checks, hearing tests, and bone density tests.

You may want to consider a theme for the open house. The FASA tool kit describes several themes and lists what is needed to put each one into action. You might decide on a specialty theme, such as Come “See” a Surgery Center. The center could provide eye exams for families with school-aged children and offer a lecture on macular degeneration for the elderly. Or you can choose to focus on specific groups such as women, men, or senior citizens. Piotrowski is considering a pediatrics theme for a future open house and would include marketing for scout troops.

Marketing techniques range from flyers to radio ads. You may also consider partnering with an expert for the marketing and other needs. Oliver contracted with a local radio station for $2,000 in exchange for marketing, solicitations of donations for door prizes, and a live broadcast from the center during the event.

Fun, games, and education

Fun will draw people and keep them coming back. In 2006, Doutt’s center hosted a picnic. Employees and attendees gathered in tents and munched on hot dogs and hamburgers while a reggae band played.

Behind the fun is a serious message: what ASCs do. Oliver’s center hung 10 large signs from the ceiling, in clear view to those walking down the hallway. The signs included key information such as what an ASC is, how much money the ASC saved Medicare in the past year, actual cost of procedures versus reimbursement, and years of experience for the nurses.

Play politics

Letters, statistical reports, and personal visits with legislators and government officials are important, says Hecht, but open houses have a special power. “We’ve seen it happen over and over again. After an official visits an ASC and sees firsthand the kind of quality care and service ASCs provide, he or she becomes one of our staunchest advocates.”

Consider inviting members of Congress and the state legislature, the governor, the mayor, city council members, and officials from state and local health departments. You will likely have the most success with getting local officials to attend. Bryant says these officials need to know that “not only do ASCs provide a broad range of surgical services and outstanding patient care, they are also small businesses that support their communities in many ways.”

Getting staff on board

Staff involvement is key to a successful event. They can help take photos, create posters, lead tours, and perform screenings.

First you have to answer the question, “How are we going to do this and still have surgery?” In Oliver’s center, surgery finished at 2 pm the day of the open house, giving staff time to set up from 4 pm to 6 pm. She asked for volunteers from her staff of 30 to help out.

Doutt’s open houses run from 9 am to 3 pm. No surgery is scheduled, so staff are paid to work the open house.
What’s the ROI?

Open houses are relatively inexpensive, from $1,000 to $4,000. Marketing and refreshments make up most of the cost. Attendance varies, but usually ranges from 75 to 300.

It is hard to quantify whether the money translates into more patients, but the small cost does reap large benefits. “Anytime you can educate the public about the high quality and high value of ASCs, it’s worthwhile,” says Piotrowski. “Patients have a choice between a hospital and an ASC, and it does influence their decision.”

—Cynthia Saver, RN, MS

Cynthia Saver is a freelance writer in Columbia, Maryland.

ASC open house tool kit

Download the tool kit at: www.fasa.org/ascopenhouse.
In addition to a detailed planning guide, the kit has ideas and practical advice.
Contents include:
• program ideas
• marketing techniques
• sample program schedules and advertising
• how to identify public officials
• sample invitation and fact sheets for publish officials
• how to work with the local media
• sample media releases.