[Re-Release] The 7 Startup Functions Physicians Can Support Transcript

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Introduction to Startup Functions for Physicians

Welcome to the Startup Physicians Podcast, where we explore how doctors lead healthcare innovation. Please like and follow our show to join our community of physicians contributing to meaningful change.

Hey everyone, welcome back to another episode of the Startup Physicians Podcast. This is your host, Dr. Allison Curfman, and today we're going to discuss the seven startup functions where physicians can add incredible value even without leaving clinical practice.

One of the most common things that I hear from doctors is, "I know I have value, but I have no idea what I would actually do at a startup." And when I first started exploring this world, I felt the same way.

But here's what I've learned after years of working with startups, building multiple companies, and now coaching other physicians. You don't lack value, you lack a mental model for how your clinical experience can map into startup functions. So today, I'm going to walk you through seven core functions where physicians thrive inside startups as consultants, advisors, or in part-time roles alongside clinical work. Before you get lost in the how would I ever get a get a role like that, I want you to pause. That's not today's episode. I want us to recognize that our minds often stop us from exploring new ideas because we don't know how to do something. But today is all about the what could really light you up and what could you imagine yourself doing. When I teach doctors how to provide services to startups, the first thing I tell them is you need a menu. You can't really walk into a meeting saying, "I'm a doctor and I want to help you somehow. Startups need to know what services you offer, what problems you solve, and how you solved them.

So, today's framework will help you start building that menu. We are all unique individuals with different backgrounds and passions, and what excites me may differ completely from what energizes you.

Product Design and Development

So, the most successful physician consultants aren't trying to be everything to everyone. They leverage their unique combination of expertise and interests to serve specific needs really well.

So, as we go through these seven functions, I want you to identify which ones resonate with you. Which make you think, "Oh, that sounds interesting." Or, "I could see myself being good at that." That's the beginning of your menu. So, let's dive in.

The first function is product design and development. So, product I've talked about product design in the past and clinical product, but product design and development is where you give feedback or help design care models, workflows, softwares, prototypes, helping teams design solutions that work in the real world. So, this could look like working with early stage founders on their initial concept or working with established companies on new product lines that they're trying to build. Or, it could be working with venture studios to decide who are trying to decide whether to fund certain concepts. So, a venture studio is when a firm is actually incubating a concept or an idea within their firm, and they haven't really decided if they're going to launch it or fund it, and they're trying to do more discovery on it. So, you might think, "I don't know anything about building products." But, I would challenge that that you're actually constantly optimizing in your clinical pro- practice. So, you may be adjusting protocols or flagging inefficiencies, or you may see gaps in care delivery often in real-time.

And every time you've streamlined a discharge process or redesigned team communication, you've done work that's similar to product development. So, I built the core clinical product for my first company with a team. It was a care delivery model for children with medical complexity, and working with a cross-functional team, I was really able to bring my understanding of these patients and their needs to design a new approach to improve their care. And I felt really confident that I knew what they needed and what their issues were because I've taken care of so many of

them.

And you're really you're not expected to code or build technology. Maybe asked to trial a product or a technology or give feedback on it, but you're expected to know what works for patients and physicians and providers and what doesn't. And so, for this role, you're really the bridge between either a technical team or a more um financial firm and the real-world healthcare delivery side of things.

Marketing and Brand Credibility

So, to reflect on this and see is this something that you could do, I'd you to reflect and see have you ever redesigned a process to make it more efficient or safer? Have you noticed gaps in care delivery and thought there has to be a better better way to do this. That's really product thinking. Moving on, function number two is marketing and brand credibility. So, this is one that sometimes makes people cringe, but I'm hopefully going to help you think about it differently.

Marketing and brand credibility is where you lend credibility to products or companies, help shape their messaging, and communicate in ways that builds trust with end users, whether the end users are patients or physicians or hospitals. You might think, "I'm not an influencer." But a significant part of physician practice, day-to-day seeing patients, is communicating to build trust.

I mean, think about that. Think about every time you go into a patient room, we use active listening, we meet patients at their level, we provide guidance and evidence, and we help influence health decisions. So, you translate complex ideas with empathy and precision, helping people move from, "I don't get it." to, "I believe in it." and really helping them take charge of their health. And that's exactly what marketing can be like as well in healthcare. So, it's building trust and communicating value that resonates with audiences. And I want to emphasize that you would only do this for companies that you really believe in.

I didn't feel like it was hard at all to market what we were trying to build at Imagine cuz I thought it was the greatest thing ever. I thought everyone needs to know about this. So, here's what this looks like in practice. So, helping companies communicate their value proposition to patients, physicians, or health systems, maybe you would be reviewing their website copy to ensure it speaks to real clinical concerns or actually meeting with their marketing teams to give feedback on their approach. You may be a thought leader for them and um be able to help support them in writing case studies or help them understand what messaging really resonates with people in your specialty or your background.

I have worked with companies where my main contribution was helping them talk to other physicians about their product. So, what if a company paid you to say, "Hey, what really alienates or annoys doctors?" You probably would know right off the bat. You'd be like, "Wow, that's obvious." But, you know the answer and they need this insight in order to craft their messaging. And you can help develop it or deliver it. So, I definitely have some folks in my network that do take on more of a brand ambassador sort of role or key opinion leader for companies that they believe in and they're willing to speak publicly to promote that brand. Maybe as a pediatrician, it's a child safety product. Or I have a friend who's an ophthalmologist who works with an eye company that she believes in. And so, that is an actual role. It's really important cuz as they're trying to build their brand credibility and get people to believe in what they're doing, they need spokespeople. So, you may be helping develop the message or deliver it.

Business Development and Strategic Growth

So, take a minute and ask yourself for this one, can you help someone gain trust and believe in a message? Do you explain complex concepts in an accessible and trustworthy way? That's marketing. So, number three is business development and strategic growth. And this one is really important because business development and sales is really the lifeblood of any business. And this function really builds on the communication skills that we just talked about. Business development and strategic growth is where you, as a physician, could potentially support conversations like contract conversations, payer negotiations, or even investor pitches, not by selling, but by helping translate clinical models into what matters for each stakeholder audience. You also provide invaluable credibility because some conversations simply cannot happen without a physician partner.

So, you are already fluent in distilling complexity. So, whether you're explaining a diagnosis to a patient or you're reviewing care options with multi-disciplinary teams, you tailor the story for your listeners. And in business development, that is really your superpower. So, what does this actually look like?

When when I pitch with my previous company, I was working with health plans on complex care models for medically fragile children, and I don't walk through every clinical nuance. I'm highlighting what matters to them about our model. So, reviewing the the model that outcomes, how we're going to reduce cost, how we're going to improve safety and coordination gaps. And I strip it down to the essentials that they need to understand why it works. And in all of our pitches, I had a business development partner who would go through most of the pitch, frankly, and handle the contracting details and all the algorithm support and all these other things, but all clinical questions came to me. It was a really important partnership, and this is the case with pretty much any healthcare company. And so, when you think about this, you have really had experience explaining things, distilling down complex clinical concepts, whether it's in in family meetings or in meetings with hospital leadership, you do know how to articulate value and build buy-in and frame clinical outcomes for non-clinical audiences. It's a really important communication skill. And then along with that, also in the category of business development, your personal network is another valuable asset. So, if you're well-connected, even if you think, "Oh, well, I my network's not valuable." Let's say you're a cardiologist and you're in a bunch of cardiology groups, you're well-connected with specialists across the country and a company wants to reach practices in that specialty, your introductions, a warm intro, could be massively valuable. And as an example, I feel like as a pediatrician who knows a ton of pediatricians, I could probably find a way to connect with any children's hospital in the country through my network. So, if somebody asked about XYZ hospital, I'd probably text friends, email some contacts, find someone to speak with, and I could make an introduction. Whereas, a you know, tech company or a venture firm, they may not be able to like get time on someone's calendar or a response to an email.

So, that is another aspect of business development. There's the actual supporting of the messaging in a pitch or, you know, trying to distill a clinical message to the right audience, or there's the networking and introduction side of it. What I want you to consider for this function is, can you make complex ideas sound understandable? And do you shape stories that really land with listeners? Do you feel energized by being in a decision-making room, or do you like connecting with people? So, for some companies, getting a contract or closing their funding is the difference between having a company and not having a company.

Clinical Research and Validation

So, this is one function that it's actually like quite easy to really emphasize what the return on investment would be for someone to hire you because if it's the difference between having a company and not having a company, it's a really big deal. Function number four is clinical research and validation. And so this is for all of my academics out there.

Clinical research and validation is where you would design studies or pilots or metrics that can prove a product or services impact or really guide the metrics that matter most. The obvious connection here is that if you've done academic research and you understand study design, measurement metrics, this is potentially an area for you. But even without formal research experience, you really understand how to measure outcomes. So, if you passed step one, two, and three, I guarantee you have a little bit of experience understanding study assessment, understanding bias, and scientific concepts that are underlying evidence-based medicine.

And you know what good clinical care looks like and how to track whether you're achieving it. So, you've probably participated in quality improvement initiatives and you understand correlation versus causation and you probably know how to design meaningful measurements.

So, when I was previously at a nonprofit health system, which is where I got started with complex kids, I was doing a population health pilot program for children with medical complexity. And we had a pretty small population and a limited budget, but I did create an IRB-approved study that measured our impact. And when I look at back at that, it looks like such a small study, but it was well-designed. So, the final study population actually only had 70 patients in it, but we had a lot of data on them over two years. And the study was well designed and showed strong evidence that our intervention led to statistically significant clinical and financial outcomes. So, by designing a pilot

study really well, I had proof that this model could work. And that tiny study became literally the entire basis for my recruitment into private equity to build the concept at scale. And it really fueled our model development and all of our contracting discussions. So, we were able to point to that evidence in our pitches to be able to say, "And this is the evidence for why we believe this is going to work." And so, this function really turns clinical intuition into measurable proof. So, designing pilots that generate evidence for business development or investment rounds and helping startups understand outcomes matter and how to measure them feasibly.

I literally had a call yesterday with someone who reached out to me because they're in their very early stages. They have some initial users on their platform, they have some initial data, and they're looking ahead to what would it take for us to move from like a direct-to-consumer sort of product to a, you know, employer contract or a health plan contract, like a big contract with a lot of people. And what they need is to prove that it actually works. So, they have the perfect opportunity for a pilot study, which they probably don't have 5 years to do a randomized controlled trial, and that wouldn't be feasible. But, there are ways that you can think about designing a study that's not just operational or marketing data, it's actually trying to determine with strong scientific validation that a product is working or not. And this company literally came to me because they wanted help designing a way to measure that. So, you got to remember these people are not physicians often times and they're often not scientists. They have a background in something completely different like finance or tech. So, they are looking for this skill set.

Customer and User Insight

So, the reflection prompt for this function is, do you love turning clinical intuition into measurable proof? Do you like doing research? And would you like to prove that something works and have it be tested rigorously and really design outcome track tracking. So, that's research fluency. Function number five is customer and user insight. So, customer and user insight is where you help startups understand what patients, physicians, or hospitals really need and where current solutions fall short. So, this is in some ways parallel to product development, but it's more focused on the end user. You live the pain points. You know what patients forget or what nurses have to work around or what makes EHRs like really infuriating. So, you're both the user and the expert understanding the gap between how things should work and how they actually work. Um so, here are some real examples of this work. So, I literally had a company reach out to me and pay me for an hour of my time because they wanted me to tell them everything I hate about ER scheduling. Like, okay. Like, that was very All I did was show up and it wasn't hard to come up with those concepts cuz these are things that we all know. It's like, how do they not know that? Well, they don't know that. They They want to design a product. They want to design a new ER scheduling platform, and they want to know what to avoid. I also have been asked to um give an assessment of why physicians don't trust locums agencies. I definitely know the answer to those questions. I can give them that insight and help them develop something better.

And so this is really like consumer feedback. I um can definitely help them understand um what some of the things are that they need to avoid. So I want you to think about this for a second. Like how many times have you used some sort of technology in your job and thought, "Gosh, whoever designed this clearly never worked in a hospital." And that's exactly the insight that com- companies really need.

So this function may be about like mapping patient journeys or identifying pain points and understanding what would actually improve care experiences. You could be the voice of end users in product development conversations.

And so maybe you help a startup understand why their platform isn't being adopted or what would make clinical decision support tools useful instead of just another like super annoying alert or what patients actually want from health apps versus what they think they want.

So to reflect on this one, do you see care gaps and think "This could be so much better." or "They have no idea what they're missing." Understand the difference between what's supposed to happen and what actually happens. That's that's user or end user insight, which is really really important for building products that actually work. Function number six is policy and advocacy. And this is a little bit of a specialized one, but policy and advocacy is where you would track, shape, or explain the regulatory landscape and help startups position their products within it. So some of you may immediately be like, "Oh my gosh, I don't know anything about regulatory landscapes." And

I understand that, but you really do understand quite a bit about health policy and regulation from every compliance training you've ever been part of.

Policy and Advocacy

So, you understand documentation requirements, you understand HIPAA and Stark laws and anti-kickback statutes. And you've probably advocated for things like patient access to services or navigating billing codes. And you know that healthcare exists within complex regulatory frameworks and determining what's possible, what's reimbursable, and what's compliant. So, this may feel kind of niche, but here's the thing. Every startup hits regulatory challenges. And I think that they really need someone who understands how healthcare operates within these rules. So, my early healthcare policy work was actually focused on barriers to telehealth. Now, I was doing this from an academic standpoint. I worked with the American Academy of Pediatrics, and I wrote their policy statement on telehealth because without payment reform and without payment for these services, this was pre-pandemic, nobody was going to adopt them, and it wasn't going to bring the access to care that we wanted. Now, again, I was doing this from an academic standpoint of, you know, working through advocacy efforts, but I can imagine how my policy work actually hugely benefited private companies that were doing telehealth to kids. So, I was able to in that policy statement explain pediatric stakeholder perspectives and advocate for payment that was necessary to expand access and speaking to policy makers. The thing about advocacy, which I don't know if you guys have ever gone to like DC with one of your like professional societies to work on an advocacy day, but speaking to policy makers, they it's kind of like being in a business development meeting.

You got to like distill the clinical concept down to truly like patient stories and concepts that are translated into understandable terms. So, that's very similar to the communication skills that we discussed earlier. And physicians in this space can explain why policy shifts matter and what's at stake for real patients. So, helping policy makers understand the clinical implications of their regulatory decisions and helping startups navigate challenges without losing sight of patient needs.

Now, granted, some of you do advocacy work not in the context of companies, but because of your clinical passion for advocating for patients. And honestly, as physicians, we all should be doing that. We should all be having a voice in policy and in what's affecting our patients. But, you also just have a very unique perspective about how policy might be affecting certain patient cohorts or certain types of disease management. And that is information that can be valuable to startups who are working in that area.

So, the reflection prompt for this one is, are you energized by changing the system or do you feel pulled to influence the rules, not just follow them? Do you understand how policy changes affect real patient care?

That's policy instinct. And honestly, some of this, like I said, all of us as physicians should be advocating for our patients and should be involved in policy if there's things that are important to our patients. So, this is not even necessarily as a startup, but I mean, I wrote that policy statement on telehealth and it really unlocked a whole lot of other opportunities for me.

Strategic Advisory and Innovation Leadership

And then, in the setting of launching a value-based pediatric company, I wrote an article in Health Affairs, which was about alternative payment models in pediatrics. And so, that was really beneficial for the company as we launched for that to come out. So, the last and final function, number seven, is strategic advisory and innovation leadership. So, strategic advisory roles or innovation leadership is where you can act as a sounding board, helping teams make smarter decisions, anticipate risk, and build clinical alignment.

So, you make decisions under pressure every day. You lead care teams and you connect data with outcomes. You think systematically, not just around individual symptoms, but how everything connects. And that's systems thinking, which is incredibly valuable in strategic roles.

My most meaningful work has been as a strategic advisor, not giving specific answers, but asking the right questions and helping founders think through clinical implications of business decisions and understand what could

go wrong and how to prevent it and connecting product vision with clinical reality. And now, I serve on multiple advisory boards for companies and nonprofits who are solving complex problems and I've built my own advisory boards and curated people with backgrounds and skill sets that could help me see all of my blind spots.

So, what does this actually involve? An advisory board usually meets quarterly for strategic guidance. And sometimes your role as an advisor could be more ongoing as like a fractional chief medical officer, or could be project-based for specific decisions or challenges. But, the key is that you're not just providing clinical expertise, you're helping them with strategic thinking. And helping teams understand how clinical decisions connect to their business goals, anticipating risks and opportunities, and building better products by thinking like both a clinician and a strategist.

So, the prompt here is, do you enjoy helping others connect the dots and make better decisions? And are you energized by helping ideas become reality? And do you naturally think about how individual decisions affect the bigger picture?

That's strategy leadership. So, there you have it, the seven startup functions where physicians add incredible value, product design and development, marketing and brand credibility, business development and strategic growth, clinical research and validation, customer and user insight, policy and advocacy, and strategic advisory roles. So, you don't have to be all seven. You probably resonate with one or two. And that's the point. Your skill set is already valuable, and the key is figuring out how to aim it.

So, notice something important. In every function, we talked about skills that you already have from being a doctor. You're not starting from zero. You're just learning to translate expertise into different contexts.

Your clinical training did not just teach medicine. It taught systematic thinking, decision-making under pressure, empathetic communication, complex information analysis, and solving problems that matter. And those are the skills that startups need, and they're just applied to different problems in different contexts. So, here's what I want you to do now.

Grab a piece of paper and write down your top two functions from today's episode. Which ones made you think, I could see myself doing that? And which made you curious to learn more? When you can name what lights you up, I can help you move towards it, but I can't pick it for you. You have to understand your own interests and strengths. So, if you're thinking, sounds great, but I have no idea how to find these opportunities." That's okay.

Don't get caught in the how. That's not a failure of vision. That's just the next step in the process. And that's what will be coming in the upcoming episodes. So, remember, you don't need new credentials to add value in the startup world. You need a new lens on the skills you already have. And you need to understand how your clinical expertise translates into startup functions, and articulate that value to the right people.

The startups need you. They need your clinical insight, your systems thinking, and your ability to understand the complex reality of health care delivery.

So, let's change the future of health care together. If you found this episode helpful, I'd love to connect with you. You can find me on LinkedIn at Dr. Allison Kerfin, or visit my website at startupphysicians.com to learn more. Thanks for listening to the Startup Physicians Podcast. This community was built for doctors who want to contribute to the future of health care. We offer support for physicians who are ready to make the next step towards building the career they've dreamed of. Visit startupphysicians.com to learn more. And if this episode resonated with you, share it with another friend who needs to hear it. Let's change the future of health care together.