

Branding - It's not just about a logo...

If any small business begins a marketing process (and practices, for the most part, are indeed small businesses), the subject of "branding" often comes up. On the surface, "branding" may seem easy to define (a logo and slogan, colors used, etc.), but if one explores a little more, the wide scope of what can be included in the category of a brand can be a little overwhelming. This article attempts to unwind the knot a little.

First, let's look at components of a brand:

The graphic identity - This is where logo design fits, but the logo isn't a complete identity. The name of the business, the style used in letterhead and other printed materials, taglines that appear with the logo and on other materials, a motto or slogan that gets used in promotional materials, images, color schemes, fonts, and other design choices are also included in the 'identity' of a business.

The corporate identity - This gets a little more complex. "Identity" (sometimes seen as image or persona) is also how everything is perceived by the outside world. This includes tangible visible aspects, as well as intangible aspects of the impression given. In business, it has become much more crucial to be as clear and as consistent as possible in the communication of the business 's image, given the huge quantity of options now available, and the speed with which decisions can be made. Identity, then, in addition to the visual aspect (graphic identity) must also be founded on basic ideas and beliefs about the company itself, its products and/or services, and an overall impression of the company. Corporate identity must be truthful and believable, and speak to the needs of its clients and customers in order to be effective. There is also the challenge of differentiating one business from another in a particular field - something most healthcare practices can relate to, since there are often many providers of the same specialty available in the same community.

Messaging and Positioning - These terms get tossed around a lot. What they really mean is the development of deep understanding by the business itself about what its role is in the current marketplace, and how it can be successful. "Messaging" shows up in the tone of copy written for brochures, web sites, social media and other published materials; slogans, taglines and other snippets of information that are used regularly; and yes, even how the staff communicates with the outside world. In the case of a healthcare practice this means understanding the practice's strengths and weaknesses, the environment in which the practice operates, the state of its competition, and the reactions its clients have to the practice itself. This can involve everything from day-to-day operations to exceptional situations. The response to each of these aspects is what guides the "position" of the practice in the marketplace, and should inform the messages the practice consistently provides to all contacts (which should include referrals and partners as well as clients). "Positioning" also refers to the emotional response and bond the business is attempting to create: making a practice seem more "human" and "approachable" to

its clients, for example, by using language, imagery and other design aspects to communicate this idea effectively.

Each of these aspects is important by itself, but it is the combination of them that makes a truly successful brand. Developing a completely new brand, or updating an existing one, often involves the same processes. Research and examination is crucially important - gone are the days when "hanging out a shingle" was enough to make a business successful. The requirement now is to know the market, and to establish a relationship with one's clients, since they can make choices with much more information at their disposal than was previously possible - and at greater speed!

While DIY marketing is popular among small businesses and a wide variety of sources are available, it is mostly through consistent and frequent attention to one's brand that such an effort is successful. The reality is, most practices do not have the resources available to maintain a brand by themselves, with all the other demands on time and personnel. So it may be reasonable to think in terms of a third party source as a reasonable alternative.

The real purpose of any brand, no matter how it comes about, is to instill a positive experience, a good opinion, and a sense of loyalty in the client. Such a reaction results from the largest campaign to the smallest kind gesture. Gaining a positive reaction and creating devotion among clients is what generates true success, and can create a genuine bond between provider and patient, provider and staff, and with the larger community. We all want to go somewhere that makes us feel as if we've been treated well and fairly. By creating that experience, practices build for themselves the true advantage in the market place, that of a devoted clientele.

Evelyn McCauley has often been a part of teams that have successfully created lasting and effective brands, and often partners with marketing consultants, copywriters and others to create, maintain or update current brands. Please visit www.emdesignconsulting.com for more information.

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