

Is Your Marketing Effective?

A loaded question? Perhaps. Most practices, like their cousins in the small business world, place marketing efforts on a second or third tier of importance.

Understandable to a point, since the daily task of building and maintaining any small business is complex at best. But the small business or practice that ignores the practice of marketing altogether does so at its peril these days. Marketing, to quote some experts, "is everywhere". (1) Ads, commercials, direct mail, social media, and of course, word-of-mouth, all play a part in the success and interest appropriate marketing can generate. And marketing isn't always about sales - sometimes, it's about patient satisfaction, building reputation, establishing or supporting a brand, or the larger goal of setting one practice apart from its competition.

This article will attempt to better define what a truly successful marketing effort may involve, and provide a brief overview of some possible starting points, as well as some methods any business can use to evaluate what has been done so far, and what could be considered for the future.

Competition is certainly one reason to consider marketing as part of a larger strategy for success. There are also others, such as growth of an organization, establishing a secure place in the local community and making an actual impact as a member of that community, and remaining current and aware of the needs of clients and referral sources. Quite often, marketing for a practice is sporadic at best. Most "campaigns" focus on only one aspect and carry with them the expectation of instant results, only to fall short of those expectations and seem like a waste of time and resources.

Therefore, the first thing any marketing strategy should consider is the answers to some basic questions:

- **Who is the target audience?** This could mean patients for a start, but it may also include referral sources, investors, and other individuals whose interest may be different than that of a patient. Each category may even require a different approach.
- **What is the nature of the service offered?** Is it treatment or diagnosis, or both? Is there a specific group that uses the service, or is the possible audience more broad?
- **What is the perception of the practice?** If the practice is new, then brand building will be much more important. If the practice is established, there will likely be other considerations such as the current nature of how it offers services, and the perception by the community of the practice. This may even involve changing the perception in some way.
- **Is there a specific message to be communicated, or is the communication more general?** This relates to perception in some ways, but also is a good indicator of the approach to marketing. It takes a specific type of marketing to promote a new treatment, for example, as opposed to a

general imaging message that may encompass much more of the practice's offerings. A good example of this is the approach used when a practice hires a new service provider, compared to the promotion of an ongoing or established policy or service.

After these questions have been considered, then it's time to dig in to the assessment itself. Interviews and concentrated sessions are often used to determine who the stakeholders in the practice are, both internal and external, and to gain the current perspective on issues such as:

- Mission and values
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Most pressing needs
- The internal culture of the practice, or how its people work and interact with one another
- The perception of the practice by each type of stakeholder - patient, owner, employee, investor, community, etc.
- Competition and possible threats
- Opportunities for advancement or growth

The assessment must also include an examination of what types of marketing have been used in the past, their success, and how consistent those marketing efforts were in supporting the practice's brand or identity. Materials to be reviewed will probably include:

- Advertising - print, radio, television, online, outdoor, etc.
- Signage, packaging, sponsorships
- Press kits or releases
- Brochures
- Web site
- Social media - Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc.
- Internal communication systems and forms
- Business identity - logo, letterhead, business card, etc.
- Event materials - training manuals, programs, etc.
- Newsletters
- Flyers, cards, stickers, etc.

Once these tangible pieces have been evaluated, it is also recommended that the level of awareness of the importance of marketing be gauged, and if necessary, increased among staff. This can involve anything from formal training of employees to establishing a protocol for dealing with marketing issues to establishing the fact that there is no support from within the practice. It may be at this stage that the need for an outside resource for marketing tasks be considered. In any case, there are once again key questions to consider:

- Is the message that is being communicated by the practice consistent?
How well are these messages being communicated?
- Are there any confusing or conflicting messages?

- Is there anything missing or wrong with how the practice communicates with its stakeholders?

There are many tools in the areas of marketing and communication analysis that can help answer questions such as these - SWOT analysis, brand image analysis, patient surveys, market research, and strategic analysis are just a few of the many techniques that can be used to explore and develop a successful marketing approach.

It is also recommended that at least in the beginning stages, a marketing professional as facilitator is considered. Setting realistic goals and matching them with the right professional provides much more possibility of success. Such an individual would be well versed in the many tools available, as well as able to offer the added advantage of an objective point of view.

Once the research and examination has been completed, it becomes much more possible to develop a guideline and plan for execution, as well as benchmarks to be met, and stages at which the success of the plan is evaluated. Flexibility is often the key here, since some marketing efforts will likely be more successful than others, and messages may need to change over time, as the practice develops and expands. The hope is that by working with a cross-section of current stakeholders, and by looking unflinchingly at what already exists, the needs of the organization can be revealed, its messaging refined, and the strategic direction and objectives for success be made clear. While not an immediate process, it is a proven method of creating a successful marketing strategy, one that will serve the practice over the long term.

Evelyn McCauley is often involved in strategic marketing and planning efforts with businesses that have recognized the need for planning and guidance in order to achieve success. She often works with organizational and marketing professionals as part of a comprehensive marketing team.

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