

# Service Can Be the Best Marketing Tool

BY RHODA WEISS

**W**hen it comes to successful communications and marketing, leaders of health care organizations are increasingly learning that the activities producing the greatest returns are often those that cost very little. They know that marketing is more about relationship building, human interactions, customer service, meeting and exceeding expectations, and reputation management than it is about fancy brochures and expensive advertising. That's especially good news in a time when the economy is struggling, reimbursements do not match costs, and dollars for promotion are scarce.

"In its broadest sense, health care marketing is challenged with helping an organization meet its community's needs," explains Suzanne Schut, director of marketing and public relations for St. Joseph's Mercy of Macomb-North, Romeo, MI. "From an operational perspective, marketing facilitates interactions that move those in a hospital's service area along a continuum, from a potential customer to one who has a long-term relationship with the organization."

Advertising frequently tops the list as the most common marketing method. However, many community hospitals find themselves unable to compete with the lush budgets of nearby regional medical centers. These community hospitals instead rely on ensuring that the services they offer meet the needs of all their "customers," ranging from employees and physicians to patients and the community at large.

A case in point is Schut's hospital, which is located in a suburb of Detroit. The 400-plus-bed St. Joseph's Mercy is currently working to transform itself into a tertiary care center, a change deemed necessary to meet its growing and aging population.

Driven by the belief that the members of a community should have local access to state-of-the-art, mission-guided care—and should *not* have to travel to Detroit's large medical institutions—St. Joseph's Mercy set out on a major expansion program to reassure local residents of



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its medically advanced capabilities and high-quality services and thereby stem their flow to city facilities.

## ADDING A "CLINICAL COORDINATOR"

But with capital and a good portion of operating revenue tied back into the hospital's growth plan, marketing funds were extremely limited. What would it take to help service lines exceed their customers' expectations, differentiate their care, and increase volume and market share?

St. Joseph's Mercy's leaders found the answer when they began exploring marketing options for the hospital's Joint Replacement Center, which treats patients with knee, hip, and related orthopedic problems. Faced with aggressive marketing—including promises of luxurious patient rooms and other perks—from competing facilities, St. Joseph's Mercy's leaders took a different approach. They hired a full-time nurse to serve as the center's "clinical coordinator." The clinical coordinator communicates with, and meets the needs of, both patients and surgeons. Partly because this position was unique in the local market, the program quickly took off.

The clinical coordinator works with patients, family members, and the surgeons' staff from the time of surgical booking until several weeks following outpatient rehabilitative care. Comprehensive, one-stop, presurgical testing and education from a multidisciplinary team of experts help patients and their families prepare for a quick recovery. Streamlined processes in place for the surgeons anticipate and meet their needs. Although the clinical coordinator has backup coverage, she is essentially fully responsible for making sure every step of the patient's "journey to recovery" goes without a hitch.

## TOPS IN ORTHOPEDICS

The results from this personalized, coordinated approach to care have been impressive. Just a year after implementation, Solucient—a health care

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## COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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### **S**t. Joseph's Mercy was named a Top 100 Hospital in Orthopedics.

information firm that, among other things, rates hospitals and the care they provide—named the Joint Replacement Center a Top 100 Hospital in Orthopedics. The recognition was based on the program's excellent quality indicators, postoperative complication rates, percent of patients returned to home, length of stay, and costs.

St. Joseph's Mercy launched a multifaceted campaign that both celebrated Solucient's recognition (and included congratulatory framed posters for surgeons' offices) and marketed the program to referring physicians and other referral sources. Since the hospital began its clinical coordinator program, Schut reports, it has seen double-digit increases in its volume of joint replacements.

#### **A STEP FURTHER**

When St. Joseph's Mercy's leaders launched a cardiac surgery program two years later, they took the concept of the clinical coordinator a step further and developed what they called the "Platinum Path to Heartfelt Care."

Under this program, the entire cardiac surgery team—from the surgeon to the ICU nurses to the home care nurses—is given a number of metrics and measurements to meet. The Platinum Path—which is, like the orthopedic clinical coordinator program, unique in the local market—identifies every step of the patients' and families' pre- and postop journeys and establishes processes that often enable the surgery and recovery to exceed expect-

tations. The Platinum Path program also has a nurse who serves as clinical coordinator. Patients and families frequently describe her as their "guardian angel," but, in fact, it is the team approach that sets the program apart from others in the area.

The program is now about 20 months old. Mortality and complication rates are well below state and national averages. And a high percentage of patients and families have taken the time to send in notes of thanks and appreciation to the staff.

To further measure the Platinum Path's impact, St. Joseph's Mercy will later this year conduct focus groups of patients who have been through the hospital's program and participated in competitor programs as well. However, it is already clear that—given patient enthusiasm and very positive length-of-stay and quality measures—the program is succeeding on every level.

"The success of both our heart care and joint replacement programs indicates that the patients' perceptions related to the level of their care really does drive market share," notes Scott Adler, St. Joseph's Mercy's vice president, community integration and marketing. "We made real clinical quality improvements through these initiatives, but we also made sure we understood and exceeded customer expectations." □

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