

Marketing Close to Home

BY RHODA WEISS & KATHLEEN LEWTON

Too often the focus in healthcare marketing is on finding "new customers"—gaining market share from a competitor by developing a better service, recruiting additional physicians who will bring new patients, or negotiating managed care contracts that will deliver incremental volume. In the process, marketers often overlook "close-to-home" audiences—such as employees, board members, physicians' office staff and patients, visitors, satisfied patients, volunteers and auxiliaries, and clergy—with whom healthcare providers can forge mutually beneficial ties.

The relationships an organization builds with these audiences are often the bedrock of its success. These groups' accessibility makes them natural allies in pursuing personalized, effective, easy-to-implement marketing strategies that produce better results than more costly and complicated approaches. In the process, they become genuine partners with the organization.

Most healthcare marketers would agree that these are important audiences, and many would say they "do something" in relation to some of these groups. But it is rare to find a marketing program that consistently and comprehensively addresses each audience.

EMPLOYEES

In every marketing plan, the first word should be *employees*. They are not only potential service users (along with their immediate and extended family members) but also vitally important sources of word-of-mouth marketing and "expert endorsement." Housekeepers, security guards, and laboratory technicians may, at any time, be asked, "You work at that hospital. Does your organization have the kind of service I need?"

Using existing communications channels (e.g., meetings, employee newsletters, bulletin boards) and creating new channels (e.g., involving employees in outbound telemarketing and adding them to direct mail lists) should be essential steps in marketing any service.



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Hospitals can also implement strategies to integrate employees more fully into the corporate culture and enhance their commitment to the organization's goals and mission. They can assign every new employee a current employee "buddy" and look for other ways to improve orientation (e.g., ask the "employee of the month" to present the benefits of working at the facility, sponsor a Saturday afternoon "fun" orientation for employees' family members).

Hospitals can take other steps to make employees more effective emissaries for the organization. Employee focus groups can meet throughout the year with neighbors, friends, and associates to identify problems and find solutions. Facilities can also reach out to employees who frequently are not included in marketing efforts, such as department heads and those who run the hospital in "off-hours" (e.g., security guards and information desk personnel).

BOARD MEMBERS

Board members may be some of the most powerful marketers available to an organization. They are well-connected, influential leaders whose opinions are sought and respected. If well informed, they can be great information channels to their own employees, their colleagues (many of whom are making decisions about managed care providers), and others. Board members who really feel part of the healthcare family can attract donations, intervene with legislators, and help the organization in numerous other ways.

Marketing personnel should keep informed about board members' professional lives and keep board members informed about hospital activities. Presentations describing important organizational plans and initiatives, and alerts detailing upcoming media coverage, are two ways of making the board aware of recent developments.

Staff should clarify board members' marketing roles. They can be encouraged to spread the word about facility services to business associates and friends. Board members themselves will ben-

efit from the more intimate knowledge of hospital services and operations.

PHYSICIANS' OFFICE STAFF AND PATIENTS

About 90 percent of the patient's time is spent with physician office staff members, who are the liaison between the patient and the physician and the patient and the healthcare organization. They play a key role in helping the patient decide which health organization to choose. And they need to know about the hospital's services. Hospitals should invite them to the annual employee picnic, service awards (on their employment anniversaries), and other social, educational, or operations events.

By offering educational programs on topics of interest to their practice, hospitals can provide office staff help in furthering their careers. Marketing staff should also ensure they receive a personalized orientation to hospital operations. In addition, hospitals can survey them on important issues such as the scheduling and response time in the laboratory, radiology, and surgery; include office managers' names in the medical staff directory; create a staffers' data base with professional and personal profiles; and form an office staffers' advisory board to help the organization address patient issues and challenges.

Patients of medical staff are another important audience. Hospitals can place information about the organization in physicians' office waiting rooms. These can include brochures; "point-of-purchase, take-one" displays; educational and program information; and other materials about the hospital. Facilities can also cosponsor programs and screenings with physicians and their patients and include them in educational programs and speakers bureau activities.

VISITORS

The typical 200-bed hospital has 400,000 visitors annually—not only people visiting patients, but also vendors, delivery people, and participants at hospital events. Retired volunteers can staff a center to answer visitors' questions and inform them about hospital services and events. A brochure can list information about visiting hours, parking, dining, blood donations, volunteer opportunities, educational programs, screens, insurance, and managed care contract listings.

Promotions can be posted in and near elevators and in waiting and reception areas. The hospital can also provide screenings in the lobbies (using retired employee-volunteers) and offer other special amenities and services.

SATISFIED PATIENTS

Satisfied patients are another key marketing audience. They can become active supporters and

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new-patient recruiters if hospitals stay in touch with them after discharge, keep them informed and interested, tell them how they can support the organization, and ask for their help.

Light-duty workers' compensation employees and volunteers can call every inpatient, outpatient, and emergency patient. They can ask about patients' satisfaction with the hospital's service; acknowledge their thanks; send them newsletters, postcards, personal letters, and news releases; and invite them to events.

VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers and auxiliaries are among an organization's most loyal supporters. The "typical" volunteer belongs to four or five other community and religious organizations. In their ranks are dozens of active, involved community leaders—ideal sources of word-of-mouth marketing and expert endorsements. Too often, however, they are the last to be told (if they are told at all) about the organization's plans and achievements.

Hospitals should make their orientation more meaningful. Every new volunteer can be paired up with an experienced volunteer. The chief executive officer can brief them personally about hospital initiatives, offering them "insider" information about a new service before it is released to the media and formally asking them to play a public relations and marketing role to the people in their sphere of influence. Such attention also helps volunteers do their jobs more effectively.

CLERGY

One of the hospital's most important links to the community, clergy should be as well informed about the healthcare organization as possible.

Hospitals should create a data base with information about each clergy person and his or her church or synagogue, including the names of presidents of associated religious organizations. Facilities should conduct an orientation for every new member of the clergy in the community, develop a clergy health newsletter, and sponsor joint programs with the local ministerial association. To make them part of the family, hospitals can provide clergy free parking privileges, access to telephones, and private space for talking with families.

The clergy are one of the most effective sources for communicating the hospital's mission to the local community. They can generate enthusiasm and support for critical community health programs that reach out to neglected and underserved populations. And in their ability to make the organization's mission vivid to members of their congregations, clergy can help recruit the core groups of committed volunteers essential to the hospital's ability to serve its community. □