



Marketing: a useful tool for radiology departments and free-standing imaging centers

"Most importantly, marketing is the single most effective tool that you have for thriving in an increasingly competitive environment. If done correctly, by encompassing how you produce, position and promote your service, you will see a far greater impact on your future success."

Healthcare's once-upon-a-time days are gone. Simply being the nearby hospital does not automatically stake your hospital's financial claim. So, in an increasingly competitive industry, what is the ideal way to market a hospital and especially a radiology service to consumers, who are often no longer just patients? Insulation from market mechanisms has resulted in highly inefficient healthcare-service structures. Steadily increasing healthcare costs have now resulted in a growing trend towards the introduction of market mechanisms based on supply and demand. Marketing is fundamental to business growth and is probably the most important success factor that is in your control and it is one of the strongest factors to differentiate you from your competitors. One misconception is that marketing equals advertising or selling, and this leads directly to the most common mistake that many physician group practices make: advertising without developing a strategic marketing plan first.

In the current healthcare market, radiology departments and free-standing imaging centers often face the challenges of falling reimbursement rates and rising costs of doing business, while competition is growing. Usually, radiologists do not have direct access to patients and are dependent on referrals for their business. The marketing of radiological services is actually the management of strategic relationships, which are dependent on this referral pattern. Key consumers include, referring physicians, patients, hospital administrators and insurance companies. Each customer group requires a specific targeted marketing plan [1].

Developing a marketing plan

Most traditional medical education programs do not address the 'business side' of medicine, and many clinicians are not prepared to develop

a marketing strategy and may need professional help in designing a coordinated, strategic marketing plan. Creating such a plan requires careful analysis of the current market, including competitors' capabilities, patient demographics and an objective assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of their own radiology practice. An effective marketing plan that dramatically increases patient referrals could actually backfire by reducing the level of service if staff become overwhelmed with increased workloads. Laying the groundwork to produce the desired effect takes research and careful evaluation. In general, all marketing plan activities focus on four core concepts (the four Ps of marketing): product, positioning, price and promotion. In healthcare, the price is not usually controlled by providers so that is generally less applicable compared with other markets.

The first step of any marketing initiative is identifying the size of your core competence market. This includes segmenting the market by age, gender, disease type, referral patterns, employment and psychographic sector. You cannot be everything to everyone, so categorize your facility's strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to the target. Next, determine the group to whom you will market your services. Will it be referring physicians, patients, patient's friends and family, contracting entities, such as insurance companies, managed care organizations or the government, or advocacy organizations? In today's market, do not underestimate or overlook the power of healthcare consumer marketing [2].

In medical imaging, the obvious products are images and reports. However, we must look beyond this to understand that we also produce patient and clinician experiences. What experience do you provide that is different or better than your competitors? What can you do to enhance that experience?



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Proper product positioning requires knowledge of these differentiating factors and how they relate back to your core mission, patient clientele, referring physicians, services and facilities. Take your core mission, for example: are you an academic center, private practice or a nonprofit medical center?

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What are the age, gender, disease state and insurance acceptance of your patient mix? Are referring physicians specialists or generalists? What type of services do you provide beyond images, reports and experiences? What is the mix of imaging services within your facility versus your competition? Promotion is the visible action that you will take to market product and services to the target. First, determine the purpose and message. Are you promoting a specific feature or benefit, or simply building awareness of your name/product/service? A word of caution: if you do not know what to promote or what your message is, then you should first rethink your marketing strategy before spending any money on promotion.

Promotion is more than advertising

There are several elements to a successful promotion: who works on your marketing and promotions? What are your key messages? Why did you choose them and how does that affect other organizational decisions? Where and to whom do you promote? When do you launch a campaign? How do you choose channels and vehicles to do your marketing?

Widespread or indiscriminate advertising is almost always the wrong answer. It is costly and difficult to measure results. A focused promotion that generates a return on investment is absolutely essential. There are several options for advertising the message beyond radio and television. Many of the most basic, and least expensive, are often overlooked, such as websites, direct mail, phone (while on hold), preview slides at movie theaters, health fairs and other sponsorship activities.

Benefits of a marketing plan

- Establish your practice as the one patients choose in your geographic area;

- Capture your individual market area and expand and capture a larger market share;
- Identify suitable marketing services for now and the future;
- Identify the right media to use, for example, print, radio, TV, direct mail, web and office literature;
- Budget expenses for the production of advertising materials and media placement.

Marketing activities must be continuous and may require the hiring or assignment of a dedicated marketing agent. It is necessary to keep all employees up to date regarding the vision and strategy of the group. It is also important to listen to your employees and have them contribute to the marketing plan. Benchmarking your service against other groups and learning from them are easy ways to keep your group ahead. Lastly, any successful marketing plan requires feedback from your customers – referring physicians, patients, administrators and insurance companies [101].

Most importantly, marketing is the single most effective tool that you have for thriving in an increasingly competitive environment. If done correctly, by encompassing how you produce, position and promote your service, you will see a far greater impact on your future success.

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