



Marketing your Radiology Practice

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As a result of today's competitive healthcare market, more hospitals, imaging centers, and physician group practices are marketing their services to referring physicians and patients. Yet most traditional medical education programs do not address the "business side" of medicine and so many clinicians are not prepared to develop a marketing strategy.



Marketing is fundamental to business growth. One misconception is that marketing equals advertising or selling and that leads directly to the most common mistake that many physician group practices make: advertise without first developing a strategic marketing plan.

Today's changing healthcare market represents the single largest source of opportunity – and threat – in diagnostic imaging. Practices face the twin challenges of falling reimbursement rates and rising costs of doing business, all while competition is growing.

While so many factors are beyond our control, two things are certain: marketing is probably the most important success factor that is in your control and it is one of the strongest factors to differentiate your practice from the competition.

Developing a marketing plan

There are many elements to a successful marketing strategy. These include those that you probably expected to see, such as:

- Setting up promotions;
- Sales decisions; and
- Advertising: budgets, targets, and channels.

However, strategic marketing will also encompass most of the major issues that you face in managing an imaging practice, including:

- Planning for hiring and purchasing;
- Allocation of resources;
- Setting goals;
- Team dynamics; and
- Managing the day-to-day operations.

The first step of any marketing initiative is identifying the size of your potential target 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, MCOs or the government, or advocacy organizations? In today's market, do not underestimate or overlook the power of healthcare consumer marketing.

The four P's of marketing

All marketing plans center around four core concepts: Product, Positioning, Price and Promotion. Within healthcare, price (reimbursement) is not usually controlled by us so that is generally less applicable than in other situations. However, consider that while price may be fixed, there are other components of value (what else is included in the service) that impact perception of the price paid and subsequently, demand for the product.



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In medical imaging, the obvious products are images and reports. Yet, 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?

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 core mission, for example. Are you an academic center, private practice, or not-for-profit medical center? What is 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 don't 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.

1. Who works on your marketing and promotions?
2. What are your key messages?
3. Why did you choose them and how does that affect other organizational decisions?
4. Where and to whom do you promote?
5. When do you launch a campaign?
6. How do you choose channels and vehicles to do your marketing?

Remember again that you cannot be everything to everyone. Therefore, widespread or indiscriminate advertising is almost always the wrong answer. It is costly and difficult to impossible to measure results. A focused promotion that generates a return on investment (ROI) is absolutely essential.

Elements of a successful marketing strategy lie in the details. Make sure you know who matters the most in the referring physician office. It may not be the clinician. Find out what is most important to your target. Is it scheduling, report turn around time, or other amenities? Use peer-to-peer marketing by developing relationships – don't be faceless or voiceless – and always measure results. This technique is often underutilized in healthcare, yet it is a smart, high-level, and ethical activity that has enormous impact on physician referrals.

Getting the message out is almost as important as the message itself. Stay focused and on task. There are numerous options for advertising the message beyond radio and television. Many of the most basic, and least expensive, are often overlooked, such as:

- Web sites;
- Direct mail;
- Phone (while on hold);
- Preview slides at movie theaters;
- Health fairs; and
- Other sponsorship activities.

Developing the message that differentiates you from your competition relies on a solid understanding of the pitfalls of common claims and core ethical issues. For example, physician quality is, for the most part, an assumed characteristic not a differentiator. Consider this analogy of airplane safety. Would you board a plane if you thought the pilot or aircraft was unsafe?

Also avoid generic claims such as "our physicians are better" or "our equipment is superior." Provide substance in your message that tells the target what specifically makes your product/service different than the competitor(s). This requires a profound understanding of your customer's needs, your abilities, and your competition's capabilities.

Most important, always remember that 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. ■