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How Marketing Can Impact Care and Cause Adoption Can Influence Marketing

Hospitals routinely participate and sponsor other organizations' causes, but contributor Anthony Cirillo explains how healthcare facilities that establish their own cause marketing efforts can build employee, community, and brand loyalty.

The gauntlet was thrown, and the marketing department at Winston Salem, NC-based Novant Health System had a challenge. Novant wanted to institute a systemwide hand hygiene program. But it was more than that. The real intention was to make germ prevention and infection reduction part of the system's culture. Nationally, it's estimated that hospital staffs comply with proper hand hygiene techniques only 20 percent of the time. Novant's goal was to reach 90 percent, and eventually achieve 100 percent compliance.

Marketing ran with it--and rarely does marketing gain an opportunity to make a real difference in people's lives. It initiated a unique and edgy campaign to create a buzz inside the organization and permanently change the quality and safety culture. This successful, award-winning campaign caught the attention of local and national media, in addition to other unintended audiences--such as community clergy who used the campaign's inspirational messages in Sunday sermons. More importantly, the campaign helped shift employee opinion, increase hand hygiene compliance and save lives.

Impacting care and creating a better experience ultimately leads to satisfied staff and patients, who then spread the word about these efforts. People make the connection and recognize that if the system could put so much thought and effort into something as simple as hand washing, think about what it must be doing throughout the organization in terms of clinical care.

I was faced with a similar challenge when employed by Rancocas Hospital (now Our Lady of Lourdes) in Willingboro, NJ. Our chief pediatrician was noticing a large amount of head injuries due to bicycle accidents coming into the emergency department. This was well before helmet laws were passed, and the message from my CEO to me was simple: "Think bicycle safety." That message led to a Bicycle Safety Day, an annual event that brought together key constituents in the community--the daily newspaper, the local cable outlet and others--together for a cause. A dramatic decrease in bicycle accidents was seen in the emergency department over the eight years I tenured the event. It was so successful that even though I became bored with planning it, the community demanded it.

Own a cause

The tenets of these campaigns can be applied to almost any quality, safety and culture initiative. Hospitals routinely participate and sponsor other organizations' causes. That is all well and good, and is part of the social responsibility of being a good community citizen. That said, if you really want to make an impact, adopt a cause that is all your own. Better yet, adopt a cause that is a natural brand extension of who you are. Frankly speaking, knowing what I know now bicycle safety may have not been the logical extension for our hospital. We had a small pediatric wing, and competed with a world-renowned children's hospitals in Philadelphia. That cause might have been better adopted by a hospital specializing in head and neck injuries. Ideally, you want to tie the cause to the services you are calling attention to in your marketing.

Pick strategic partners, and bring communities together

When planning the bicycle safety day, we were looking for as much free "stuff" as we could get. So we trotted off to the local daily newspaper to pitch the cause. Same with the local cable company. That resulted in newspaper coverage and free advertising. More importantly, it united us in a cause and built relationships for the future. That ultimately came in handy-- during this time we had to close a sister hospital in the same county that had been in the community for eighty plus years. It was contentious. But our ultimate relationship with the media made the eventual story a quick one day and out affair. Did the strategic partnering help? Definitely.

When you bring together people for a cause and step out of the way and let them communicate with one another, the halo effect on your brand is tremendous. March of Dimes has Walk America. The American Heart Association has its heart walk. Harley Davidson has a road rally. Think about how people feel when they participate. They are having fun and doing something worthwhile.

And they remember when it is all over who brought them together. Word of mouth spreads. An emotional connection is made. Effective cause marketing results in ongoing brand loyalty. For a non-healthcare example, just look at Target's Take Charge of Education program. Since 1997, it has donated \$120 million to the nation's schools distinguishing the Target brand from its competitors.

Cause marketing also has the potential to strengthen bonds with employees. Increasingly, younger workers have a desire to work for a company they consider socially responsible and ethical, even if it means making a lower income. Companies that establish cause marketing attract and keep good employees.

Following are three tips to consider when implementing cause marketing:

1. Plan for the future. As I noted in the bicycle example, involving key stakeholders in your cause builds good will for the future. When tough times hit (and they will) you can soften the blow and help it blow over because of the relationships you have built in your cause marketing efforts.

3. Market (and document) your mission. In an era of increased IRS scrutiny, what better way to show and document your mission orientation than with a great cause. Document your efforts and your results and make sure to include them in Form 990 and any other community benefit reporting that you undertake.

4. Tie-in to philanthropic efforts. Who in the community might benefit from your cause? What do you know about them? What is their circle of influence? How deep are their pockets? Letting key community members know what you are doing in the planning stages will not only involve them but also assure that word starts percolating well before you formally announce what you are doing. The dearer the cause to key constituents, the better chance of support for that and other efforts.

5. Create a brand extension. In some respects, adopting the right cause will extend your brand and complement your mission and values. Need a pop culture example? The creator of the British and then American versions of "American Idol" did so for a reason. He wanted to identify talent to sign to his record label. That the television programs became bigger than life was just a bonus. His end goal was talent and record sales. How does the cause you adopt extend your brand?

It is kind of ironic that healthcare marketing starts with good community relations and being a good community citizen. There is often little consideration that if a strategic initiative is further thought out, it could help the hospital market itself and build its brand. As they say, what goes around comes around.