

## Hospitals Can't Advertise As They Please

Contributor **Anthony Cirillo** outlines why healthcare marketing is very different than traditional advertising in other industries.

Advertising agencies are drooling like five-year-olds looking at a McDonald's wrapper over the latest research about the McDonald's brand. In a Stanford study, toddlers preferred foods--even carrots and milk--that came wrapped in the familiar packaging of the Golden Arches. They also preferred the taste of burgers and fries when they came in McDonald's wrappers over the same food in plain wrapping. For some, like Donny Deutsch, host of "The Big Idea" on CNBC, this showed the power of brand marketing, particularly advertising. Others were more concerned about the effects of advertising on such a young demographic.

I have often taken healthcare marketing to task for putting too much emphasis on advertising. I hope this latest study--which, by the way, only included 63 children--does not take the focus off of more important advertising issues. Let's put some things into perspective:

**1. Hospitals market what people don't want.** To market healthcare is to market something people do not want and may not need for years. Five-year-olds are not looking at hospital television advertising and making notes for the future. For that matter, neither are their healthy parents. Healthcare is rarely on anyone's radar screen unless he or she needs it.

**2. A brand passes from generation to generation.** Ever compare your cupboard or laundry room with that of your mother? Chances are you have many of the same brands she used when you were growing up. Even hospitals are subject to this fate, for good for or bad. Growing up in south Philadelphia, it was unspoken but understood where you would go if you became sick. Guess what? If I lived there today and had an emergency, I would probably still tell the ambulance to take me there.

**3. Boomers are more educated in their buying decisions than previous generations (and five year olds).** At least, that's what everyone says. I have my doubts, judging from my own personal interactions with the healthcare system this year (turning 50 is great). At the very least, I think the older you get, the more cynical you get, so marketing messages may be viewed with more disdain.

**4. The Web is the great equalizer.** Social and viral marketing are catching on in service businesses. Just ask the Paris, TX, hospital that's been battling to identify an anonymous blogger that's been posting negative content about them. People are talking amongst themselves about your hospital, too.

**You Still Need Branding**

Ouch! Did I really just type that? Yes, branding has its importance. But branding is more than just advertising. I know you know this. But look around. The tool of choice, the biggest budget-buster for hospital marketers, is mass media advertising.

The Cleveland Clinic just appointed a Chief Experience Officer for a reason. They realized that the brand is formed at the point of delivery. Making the delivery the best and most consistent it can be results in happy patients, positive word of mouth, and higher rates of referral. A few things to consider:

**1. Be consistent in your message.** I have encountered so many hospitals that have the same positioning. They tell me they have a reputation for being "high-touch" and offering personal care and for being "high-tech," with the sophisticated equipment and techniques of their big city brethren. You can't have it both ways. You cannot be all things to all people. You need to dig deep and find your unique selling proposition. Your messaging and your marketing must remain consistent.

**2. Interaction is the name of the game.** If you are using television advertising, incorporate some compelling reason for people to go to the Web and do something at your site. One hospital ran two different commercials on how an expectant mom should announce her pregnancy to her husband. The choices were to show him paint samples for the spare bedroom or place an extra dinner setting at the table. The hospital asked people to go online and choose which advertisement they preferred. Distinctive imagery plus a call to action yielded considerable audience interest. The spot with the extra place setting was produced and aired.

**3. Make lives better and show the lives you've improved.** The primary reason people go to hospitals is to make their lives better. Many hospitals know this, but focus too much on technology instead of the ways they heal their patients. Healthcare is an emotional experience. Show the person who was helped by the equipment, and not just the equipment itself. Testimonials work best, but far too few hospitals feature real stories and real experiences in their advertisements. Point people to juried information on healthcare, and when they come back to your site, complement that information with information and stories of your own.

**4. Connect communities.** If you can encourage people to come together and talk to each other about their mutual healthcare interests, it will reflect back on your brand. That can be accomplished online or face-to-face. Evangelical Hospital in Lewisburg, PA, takes this approach clinically with its joint replacement program. They take a team approach that allows small groups of patients to go through the process together and share their experiences. Shouldice Hospital in Canada takes this to a science. Three to four day hospital stays, communal dining, and reunion dinners all foster interaction amongst like communities. And when you look at their statistics, 96 percent of referrals come from word of

mouth. The Internet is one way to bring people together, but consider making some changes in-house before you begin outreach. Look strategically at all of the support groups you host and think about how to leverage them, in a good sense, for everyone's benefit.

### **A Dose of Reality**

Let's keep in mind that, by and large, people still go where their doctor tells them. That said, consistent, integrated branding can still encourage patients to choose your hospital.

So before you put the golden arches on the roof of your building or rush to pour more dollars into advertising, consider the different beast we call healthcare. Yes, we can learn a lot from other industries and can benefit from their best practices. But this is one study we're better off fasting from than feasting on.