

# Competitive Edge: The Art and Science of Branding

By Kim Longeteig

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Branding is the equivalent of building a reputation and managing the brand and brand perceptions with actions.
- Create and craft a desirable brand by associating brand with a personality. This is important because it relies on the collective experiences a customer has with the brand and is one of the most straightforward ways to craft a brand.
- Building and maintaining brand strategy is an ongoing process that must be managed. Effort must be continually made to increase the brand's perceived value to referrers and patients, to differentiate the brand from competition, to make and keep brand promises, and to create customer loyalty.

**Establishing** a competitive edge consists of crafting a brand, identifying a unique position in the marketplace, and executing a brand strategy. Branding is much more than a logo, tagline, or new tri-fold brochure. It is more than the message a marketer carries into the field. Branding is a promise . . . a promise that is delivered. It is the equivalent of building a reputation and managing the brand and brand perceptions with actions. A marketer who sells newly available evening appointments to referring offices with the intent of changing referral habits trusts that the facility will provide ongoing service. If the once available evening slots are suddenly eliminated, referrers will be left with a negative brand impression. The goal of branding is to build a clear, concise, and believable reputation that translates into being the preferred provider in the marketplace and to retain loyal referrers. Establishing this position takes time and resources.

Whether creating a new brand or working to reposition a current brand, it is important to take into consideration that talking about branding, understanding what branding is, and *actually* branding a facility are very different. In order to effectively brand a facility, several key factors need to be identified. Will the brand be desirable to the customers? Will the facility be able to deliver upon the brand promises? How will the brand be differentiated from the competition? Will the brand stand the test of time?

## Creating a Desirable Brand

Developing a brand that is desirable to customers means the message has to be compelling and the brand must create an emotional connection. Think of the brand as a person with a personality. The critical element here is that the customers are responsible for determining the brand's personality. If this is true, how are you supposed to manage your brand if you aren't responsible for its personality? By managing brand perceptions. For a brand to be associated with a personality, it must have a reputation. In order to establish a reputation, there has to be a record of service—eg, delivering on promises. Hone in on brand perceptions, and ultimately how the brand will be positioned, by determining what makes the brand different from other similarly branded services and facilities in the area.

The concept of associating a brand with a personality is important because it relies on the collective experiences a customer has with the brand and is one of the most straightforward ways to craft a brand. All of the things that represent or contribute to a brand go into shaping its personality—eg, schedulers, technologists, radiologists, accessibility of services, timeliness of reports, the patient experience, etc. What do each of these components say about a brand's personality? Is it family-oriented? Genuine? Accomplished? Trustworthy? Understanding? Dependable? Or is it young, condescending, and carefree?

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A brand's personality will be the driver between what differentiates the services and facility from those of the competition. If a brand's personality falls into any of the latter traits, it may be time to reposition the brand in the marketplace. How do you find out which personality traits your brand carries? Ask the customers!

## Crafting The Brand

An effective brand must consist of differentiating features. A few examples of features to focus on include:

- **Logo.** Is there a substantial amount of goodwill wrapped up in the logo—ie, do referring practices identify the facility by its logo? If not, or if the logo is dated, it may be time for a fresh look.
- **Corporate colors.** Are the colors used in marketing collateral consistent with the experience referring physicians and patients have when they choose the facility?
- **Staff.** Is the service that staff (including receptionist, schedulers, technologists and radiologists) provides to the customers fluid, accessible, and timely?
- **Technology.** If a facility is the leader of the technology pack in the market, most likely, the competition is going to catch up. Beware about centering a brand around technology when that position can easily be weakened.
- **Quality.** Are the experiences referrers and patients have with the facility consistent with the brand message? No one goes into a facility expecting bad service or a delayed interpretation. But when mistakes happen, facility staff must seize the opportunity to correct a faulty process or risk losing future business.

## Brand Strategy

Developing brand strategy is a very real process, and building a strong brand may be one of the most painstaking processes

in marketing a business. One of the hardest aspects of developing a brand strategy is recognizing it is an ongoing process—one that must be maintained—and not one that is finalized in an afternoon meeting. Attention must be given to the brand. Failing to give a brand and its strategy proper attention will have you rushing towards the “shiny things” (like a fish after a lure that glimmers in the sunlight). In medical imaging marketing, where time must be divided among numerous initiatives, it is easy to get distracted by issues, opportunities, and “shiny things” that crop up with a moment's notice. All the more reason to do a branding check and evaluate if straying from the original course fits into the overall strategy.

An exercise in branding is often, but wrongly, defined as designing a new logo, choosing a fresh palette of corporate colors, or distributing a new piece of collateral. While these things are all components of a brand, they are not the entire brand strategy. Here are a few specific steps to help develop a branding strategy.

### Identify

In the first phase of developing the brand strategy, identify several market factors. These include the primary target customers (referrers), the competition and their strategies, and how the facility's services will be positioned in the market. It is important to keep a narrowed focus by working with a targeted base of referrers during this early stage and then expand the reach as the marketing program grows. Working closely with referrers to fulfill their needs will help identify a facility's unique selling proposition (USP). A USP is the benefit the services will provide. Identifying this “gap” in the marketplace provides direction for overall marketing efforts. If a recognizable need does not currently exist in the marketplace, a desire for the services may need to be created. A marketer can accomplish this by asking

questions of referring offices to identify service needs. Referring offices may not be aware of what is missing or desirable until a particular service offering is brought to their attention.

### Develop

In the development phase of formulating a brand strategy, efforts should be focused on the images, messages, and interactions on every level of the organization that will represent the brand. The brand strategy development phase is the essence of the marketing and action plan. Every verbal and non-verbal message that is used to communicate to the target market should work to serve the overall objectives and goals. During this phase, the radiology administrator is instrumental in the overall success of establishing a brand. The administrator's role should be to instill the importance of brand consistency throughout the organization. Ensuring that each staff person responsible for service delivery understands the fundamentals of the brand will translate into a successful brand strategy. It is in this mix that a reflection of the business is created - a reflection that ultimately builds the reputation of the brand. See Box 1 for a synopsis of developing a brand strategy alongside social media.

### Execute and Monitor

All good plans must be mobilized for them to be effective. It is in this phase that full advantage is taken of the information that has been gathered and developed to execute the brand strategy. Communicating the brand externally requires the full participation of everyone involved—every touch point throughout the facility is responsible for representing and managing the brand.

Facility-wide “buy in” must not be referred to with tongue-in-cheek when it comes to overall branding strategy. A vital part of branding success is to communicate the strategy internally in a way that everyone involved understands what their roles are—how they will participate and how to monitor outcomes. This may come in the form of increases or decreases in referral patterns or feedback from the referral base.

## ■ BOX 1. Branding and Social Media

Have you embraced social media as a valuable marketing and branding tool, or are you still wondering what all of the fuss is about? Whether you still need to be convinced of its effectiveness, don't feel you have the time to work it in, or lack the support to start a social media initiative for your organization, it is important to recognize social media is here to stay.

Social media has completely transformed the way we communicate with others, how we access information, and how we make purchasing decisions. There are numerous social media platforms (eg, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) and it is important to understand how they work and how they affect a facility and its brand. Don't assume that if you are not participating in social media that your brand is not on the radar. It is entirely possible that your brand is being represented by either your referrers, patients, or your employees in some way.

So, why should you consider getting involved in social media as part of your branding strategy? Because it is an extremely effective marketing and branding tool. It is relevant, instantaneous, essentially free, and it fits your target market's lifestyle. It builds a sense of community, supports internal culture, and makes you more productive.

While the overall brand strategy is dependent upon staying the course, it is important to be prepared to be flexible. Market conditions may change quickly and being ready to adapt a brand to the current marketplace will serve a facility well in the long run. It is through this process that the organization will develop a brand that is both consistent and recognizable in the marketplace. A foundation will be established that all business activities and decisions can be based upon.

### Brand Consistency

Effectively identifying a brand that is durable over time can only be accomplished by being consistent. Utilizing consistent and cohesive visuals, messaging, and delivery are the keys to building a brand that can be trusted—and a brand that is trusted promotes loyalty. Fortunately, being consistent does not mean lacking in creativity and being uninspired. Becoming a resource to referring offices by providing materials that make their jobs easier—such as CPT codes, a list of indications for ordering exams, or information on how the facility is being prudent in light of radiation safety concerns—will help referring offices manage and educate their

own patients when medical imaging is necessary.

If a facility has been in the marketplace for a significant amount of time, it may be tempting to take a brief detour from the brand once it has become established. In reality, steering away from the brand will only cause brand confusion. Only the strongest brands (eg, Apple, Nike, Coca Cola) can afford to shake up their brand strategies and still remain on the top of a consumer's mind. To avoid diluting a brand, or creating confusion between a facility and its competition, be consistent across all customer touch points at all times.

The services provided and the manner in which they are provided can have a significant impact on a brand. Offering a new service simply because the competition is doing it or because it is the latest, greatest piece of technology is not reason enough. Thoughtful consideration must be given to determine the resources necessary to maintain a new service. Without it, the new service is nothing more than a "shiny thing" that gets some attention and then dilutes an organization's reputation when it either fails to meet its brand promise or abruptly stops offering the service.

For example, a new imaging center that focuses on women's services offers a walk-in service. What better way for a woman to have complete control over her imaging needs than to have instant access to the facility? No one else in the market offers a walk-in service similar to this, so differentiation is a slam-dunk. But what happens when the schedule fills up with appointments? Will the walk-in be forced to wait for scheduled appointments to be seen first? Or will there be a proactively designed daily schedule so that a walk-in can be easily accommodated regardless of scheduled appointments?

### Brand Management

The process of establishing and maintaining a brand brings us to brand management. As a part of managing a brand's perception, effort must be continually made to increase the brand's perceived value to referrers and patients, to differentiate the brand from the competition, to make and keep brand promises, and to create customer loyalty. Referrers who experience a consistent service level from a facility oftentimes become loyal referrers and contribute to increases in referral patterns when patient volume allows. These referrers

are generally excellent sources of information should service levels falter and brand promises need to be reinforced. The time invested in creating a strong, consistent brand will result in a positive return on investment. A brand strategy will have been developed that is both manageable and effective.

## Conclusion

If modality volumes are not where a facility anticipates they should be—whether a new or existing service—it may be tempting to develop an educational flyer, arm marketer's with leave-behinds, or advertise the value of the underperforming service. While all of these things can be helpful, doing a brand analysis may be a more important first step. Are the internal

touch points following through on how the facility is being positioned externally or has the brand reputation been damaged by over-selling and under-delivering? If necessary, brush up on the steps and guidelines here to realign current brand strategy. Do a system wide check to determine if scheduling is accommodating to referral needs, receptionists and technologists are providing quality service, and radiologists are accessible and providing quality, timely interpretations. If internal functions are performing well, brand perceptions may be misaligned and re-educating referrers of a facility's capabilities and brand promises will be required. Keep in mind that strong brands are not created overnight and each step in the process will take time and dedication to fully realize the return on investment. 🌱

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