

Starting a Marketing Department

The Great Start-up BY KIMBERLY LONGETEIG

HELP WANTED:

Marketing Director, new to area, with no previous healthcare background or knowledge of radiology - the greener the better - to take a crash course in mastering radiology modalities, terminology, and protocols by starting up our first-ever marketing department. Identify and personally visit over 600 referring providers and medical office staff to build clinic awareness and increase patient volume, while being responsible for promotional events, graphic and Web site design, copywriting, marketing, advertising, media buying, internal and external PR, and community involvement. It goes without saying the perfect candidate will be a problem solver and will need to work long hours and some weekends and stay dedicated, while remaining flexible in a continually evolving position.

OK, so that's not the ad I answered when I took this position, but two years later, it's still the work I love.

The reality is, the practice wanted growth and is still growing in the face of increasing competition, and they needed to step up their customer service efforts and create more visibility of their diagnostic services to gain market share. They were ready to hire someone to start a marketing department, which might be just what you want to do. But how?

A marketing department begins with a plan that is developed based on many factors: your current situation, available budget, and the allocation of those dollars, short term and long term practice goals, the types of efforts you will pursue to achieve results, and systems for accountability. Most of all, your plan needs to be flexible because market conditions and practice goals will change from year to year.

Find Out Where You Are Before You Decide Where You Need To Go

Just about the time you think you know where you are, you'll realize that's not where you are at all. Such was the case when we got started with our marketing efforts. One of my first goals was to identify who our referring physicians (our customers) were and where they were located. Being new to the area, my two best friends quickly became the Yellow

Pages and MapQuest, and getting lost was a daily occurrence. But alas, the list of referring offices grew...and then things got interesting.

Introductions, learning names, and assessing what the referring clinicians needed from us in terms of preferences or requirements led first to needing a more user-friendly referral form. Not having a radiology background, I didn't know at the time if what I created was the real deal or not, but it got us headed in the right direction.

Next came offering the convenience of fax scheduling. Then we had a problem with "misplacing" the faxes, so we implemented a software system for electronically capturing and permanently storing the faxes. Problem solved.

Then there were concerns voiced over lengthy phone hold times or multiple transfers, so we created a scheduling hotline that gave our referrers a direct connection to our schedulers.

In no time at all, the next task at hand was the lack of awareness over which payers we accepted and the critical importance of this information for our referrers to be able to use our services. This was all a result of assessing our current situation, and we were just getting started.

In addition to this phase, you'll also need to know who your competitors are, and what your obstacles, opportunities, and strengths are.

The Marketing Piggy Bank

The cost of your marketing efforts should be arranged before the new person is hired, which leaves no room for surprises. However, the right candidate may be able to share insight about these costs or share their experience (such as graphic design abilities) in a way that may reduce your overall budget.

At the very least, a pre-planned budget should include:

- The marketing representative's salary
- Graphic design
- Web site production, hosting, and maintenance
- Advertising
- Printing and postage
- Holiday gifts, premiums, and meals or entertainment for referring physicians
- Special promotional events
- Continuing education for the marketing new hire

Set realistic amounts for all costs, and remember to leave room for flexibility, as no expense will be certain until project bids are obtained.

A general rule of thumb for your marketing budget is approximately 1% - 2% of your facility's gross revenue, but in all actuality, may be much less, depending on the size of your practice.

Later on, when your goals are outlined, your budget will need to be broken down. Creating timelines and calendars showing how much money will be spent over a certain amount of time and how much will be allocated to each effort will keep you on track. You'll also have a better idea how much assistance you'll need from the outside, such as an advertising agency's help or a freelance graphic artist.

Keep an Eye on Your Future

They still don't know? You've practically shouted your message from the rooftops to promote your new service, and you thought surely everyone was aware by now. No doubt you have to keep the message on the tops of the minds of your referrers to change their habits, but how could the message still have gone unheard? It's a frustration we all face in marketing, and is where looking to the long-term effect comes in.

"Where do you see yourself in five years?" We've all answered this popular question before. And it, along with your three-year, one-year, and short term expectations, actually become your marketing plan.

Your practice goals can arise from several areas. Increased practice revenue is a given, but what about geographic goals, such as growing the practice's physical size with additional modalities or relocating into a larger space, increasing the number of doctors on staff, or growing an attractive practice for the purpose of an acquisition or merger?

Your practice mission statement should back up your goals for growth and how to manage that growth. If your practice doesn't have a mission statement, or if its capacity doesn't

reflect your goals, now is the time to make those changes.

Get specific about the goals you set for the practice, and keep your eye on the future.

Choose Your Own Road to Success

It started last February...an idea to produce a newsletter that would go to all of our referring providers and their medical office staff. Would it go out once every quarter? Or maybe every two months? No, it would go out each and every month, because we knew we had more than enough information to share, and the opportunity to share it in this format far outweighed the struggle of making it happen every month. For the first six to seven months, the newsletter was a solo effort, and then with the expertise of our radiologists, it reached a higher level, including "Case of the Month," procedure articles and excellent quality photos of exams. It isn't just a monthly newsletter, but a marketing piece that referring offices ask for every time I visit. It gets posted on bulletin boards and saved for future reference, not just thrown away.

Every practice has different ways of achieving their objectives. A late afternoon pizza delivery, a cooler full of soda on a hot day, or a piece of chocolate on a Monday can go a long way. But, like our newsletter, your efforts need to have staying power. You can't say that about a box of donuts, although it is very important to have fun with your referrers.

Additional options for accomplishing your goals include:

- Adding convenience for patients by putting your prep kits in referrer's offices
- Advertising in trade publications
- Mass media advertising
- Internet services, such as online scheduling and registration through your Web site
- Community involvement through associations or making donations to related causes, allowing your practice to receive "air time" through the event's media coverage
- Public relations
- Employee relations

One of the best things you can do is to be certain everyone in your organization is aware of and understands what's going on in the practice, so that they can and will support the goals of the practice.

Communicating information about the customer's satisfaction with current services and their requirements and preferences will be a primary function for your marketing person. This information can go directly to the radiologists and/or through a marketing database. With this information, your marketing person can act as a trouble-shooter for the radiologists, plan for the future, and be prepared for damage control, if necessary.

And because they'll wear many hats in their role, you'll want to look for someone who is outgoing, personable, and engaging, but also someone who will take on courier duties if needed.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

Your image is a direct reflection of your practice. It will be used to create a brand that everyone will recognize and understand what it represents.

But there will always be times, no matter how hard you've tried, that confusion will still exist. Recently, when I was visiting a new clinic, I was told, "Someone from your facility already came to see us." This wasn't really the case, but being a new clinic, a barrage of competing information was coming into their office, and differentiating our practice from the rest will be a work in progress.

Pursuing more visibility for your clinic and services means knowing what kind of image or brand you want the practice to have. In many ways, you can treat your image like it is a person, and your job is to give it a personality. It may be one of professionalism, one of growth and state-of-the-art technology, or one that seeks awards for its accomplishments.

The look and feel of your practice is your brand, and includes key elements such as your logo, tagline, colors, copy, and a consistent and cohesive design platform.

Time and effort will be required to develop an image that instantly identifies you and displays your uniqueness from your competition. This image must ensure your customer's experience lives up to your brand's claim. Every form of marketing communication and interaction must consistently have your brand applied to it.

The result of a long series of positive customer experiences will be brand loyalty, where your customer is committed to referring to your clinic, and it is your ultimate goal.

Branding sometimes makes the most sense in the funniest ways. One referrer summed it up perfectly when she said, "Oh, so you're their Mother Ship!" My thoughts, exactly! She was beginning to understand the relationship between our two primary facilities, one of which is a joint venture.

Marketing Measures Up

One of the best measures of marketing success is when you get to the office in the morning and find out that your practice just scanned its 500th patient on your new CT scanner. Or when particular customers who you've been working with for a long time, finally say, "Your facility has stepped up and we don't have a reason to refer to your competition much anymore."

These comments, cards, letters, and phone calls are all the real evidence of seeing your marketing efforts work.

Marketing is about building awareness and dominating share of mind, and will often take repeated impressions to be successful. With this in mind, it is possible to track short-term volume increases, but more plausible to focus on long-term increases in awareness levels, shifts in referral patterns, brand differentiation, and brand loyalty.

The development of your marketer's new role should include a system for accountability, based on either effort or outcome, and tracking of those results. With these systems in place, your practice is sure to have great success.

And when your customers are eager to talk to you (and they really listen), and they actually hug you because they really appreciate your help, you know you've made a difference.

So, now it's two years later, and if I were to write an ad that honestly captured the expectations and thrill of the position for an upcoming marketing manager, I think it would be worded about the same as the one at the beginning of this story. It's a never ending, always challenging, and sometimes frustrating effort. But knowing what I know now, I'd do it all over again.)))

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