Use Strategic Marketing to Maintain a Healthy Practice

If they do any marketing at all, many oncology practices do it on the fly—an ad placed once in a while, an occasional mailing to referring physicians in the area. But without a guiding plan, energy and funds may be frittered away on haphazard or inconsistent strategies that have marginal effect. In contrast, a strategic marketing plan has defined goals with measurable objectives. It includes market research, strategies linked to objectives, a timeline and budget for each initiative, and evaluation of the results.

Market research is key to optimizing your marketing efforts and budget. It is often the most time-consuming step, and it is tempting to just skip it and go with what you know, but having a plan will pay off in the long run. You should conduct research on consumers in your market area, referring physicians, and your competition.

Consumer Research

Basic information about consumers in your market as well as potential new markets should be obtained and regularly updated. Where do they live and work? What is the breakdown of their ages? What insurance coverage do major employers provide?

Beyond the demographics, find out what services consumers want. Ask patients which services they find most valuable, and ask for their wish lists of services that would have helped them when cancer was first diagnosed. Ask them to rank the importance of practice aspects such as extended hours, weekend appointments, a nutrition counselor, and professional financial counseling. Find out how nonpatients in your area perceive your practice (if they are aware of it at all) and how they perceive other cancer care providers. How would they obtain information about cancer care services if they needed them?

Focus groups, telephone surveys, and mail surveys are useful methods for assessing the consumer market. Kansas City Cancer Center, a multidisciplinary oncology practice with nine offices in the greater Kansas City, Missouri, area, frequently uses focus groups for market assessments. For example, the practice convened focus groups of family members of patients who had died 9 to 12 months previously to assess how well the practice handled the end-of-life process. In another example, the practice used focus groups of women, both patients and nonpatients, to evaluate perceptions about current and potential breast health services.

Dallas-based Texas Oncology, now with 90 sites of service all over Texas, conducted telephone interviews with consumers in each community to assess the practice's name recognition and strengths. "Our initial plan was to use different strategies

in different markets, depending on the strength of our brand recognition," says Steve Paulson, MD, president. "But the information that came back to us was sobering. We found out we weren't the household word we thought we were." Consumer research proved to be the critical element in Texas Oncology's establishment of new marketing objectives.

Marketing Mistakes

Do nothing. If you think marketing is not for you—your practice is doing fine, and you have never done any marketing before—here are two words for you: Just wait. Complacency opens the door to competition.

Limit marketing to traditional paid advertisements. Jeannette Bloomfield, national practice marketing director for US Oncology, finds many practices spending up to \$20,000 for an ad in the yellow pages. She comments, "No one will tell you 'I went to the yellow pages to find my oncologist.'"

Make assumptions about your market. Your image may not be what you think it is, or you may be missing the boat on what is important to others. Conduct research about both consumers and referring physicians.

Spend more than is necessary. Take advantage of freebies. Use hospital resources such as welcome receptions for new medical staff members. Volunteer for public speaking opportunities.

Create your own Web site. An experienced professional will know how to organize for easy navigation and how to maximize search engine optimization techniques.

Overreact to competition. Do not create a glossy brochure or place a radio ad as a knee-jerk reaction to a competitor's initiative. Stick to your marketing plan, implementing strategies to meet defined objectives.

Promote your practice without a marketing plan. Without a plan that defines goals, strategies, tactics, budget, and intended results, you are wasting both energy and money.

Research on Referring Physicians

Keep tabs on potential and current referral sources—who they are, where they are, whether their practices are growing, and how often they have referred to you. Develop a system to know when new physicians come to town. Find out what referring physicians think about your patient care and your front-office procedures, as well as what they think about other cancer specialists in your area. Determine what kind of consultant reports and patient care plans they prefer and expect.

Using an outside consultant or agency to gather such information has obvious advantages in obtaining candid responses. Teri Guidi, MBA, chief executive officer of Oncology Management Consulting Group in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, reports that one market assessment she conducted revealed that although the oncology group members thought they were providing leading-edge treatment, other physicians felt they were too aggressive and were overtreating. “Perception *is* reality when it drives behavior,” Guidi notes.

Assess Competition

Stay informed about what other cancer care specialists in your area are doing and, if possible, where they are headed. Compile a profile of each competitor, including size of practice, physician qualifications, niche services and markets, primary hospital affiliations, competitive strengths and weaknesses, marketing activities used, and likely strategic moves. Much of what you learn will be subjective—gathered from other physicians, your own patients, and your acquaintances in the community. Gather as much objective external data as you can find. In addition to practice Web sites, consider sources such as state and local health-related associations, the Chamber of Commerce, the Better Business Bureau, and local hospitals.

Analyze Your Findings

Use your market research findings to set marketing goals. Do you provide a service of which consumers are not even aware? Do some referring physicians not know about the diagnostic and treatment capabilities your practice offers? The results of your market research should lead you to set measurable marketing objectives that will help you meet your overarching goals.

In the case of Texas Oncology, consistent use of the practice name by all administrative staff, especially in answering the telephone, was first on the to-do list. Previously, some staff used the acronym TOPA (the insider term for Texas Oncology, PA), others used US Oncology (Texas Oncology is an affiliate of its network), and in many locations, the local name, such as Longview Cancer Treatment Center, was used instead of Texas Oncology.

What Is Your Practice Identity?

Establishing a clear practice identity is essential for effective marketing. Identify the image you want to have in the community—the core value that you offer or the identity you want to convey—and use this practice identity consistently in all of your marketing messages. Academic centers and large oncology networks already have brand identities that have worked for years to deliver strong messages about their services and accomplishments. You may be competing for the same pool of cancer patients.

Web Site Essentials

You need a Web site, even if it provides only basic information such as office hours, location and directions, physician names and credentials, and contact information. The Internet is the patients’ tool of choice to investigate potential providers. Having a robust, up-to-date Web site with relevant content that is user friendly and graphically appealing can help consumers feel connected to your practice and view your business as a resource in their battle with cancer.

On every Web page, promote your practice identity, not only with your logo and tagline, but also in the look and feel you want to convey.

Highlight benefits to the patient in all communication.

Use a professional Web site designer and a professional writer, even for simple sites.

Be sure every page and every link is fast loading, even for users with a 26K modem.

Incorporate excellent search engine optimization.

Use only current photographs of physicians and other staff.

If a large part of your market speaks a foreign language, include at least one page in that language. Be sure the link to that page is prominent on your home page.

Check for broken links.

Be meticulous about keeping information current. Nothing is more maddening than obtaining a wrong phone number or e-mail address from a Web site.

Your brand identity should reflect your mission and values and should reinforce the strategic advantages of your practice. Identify what sets your practice apart and gives you a competitive edge, or focus on a strength of your practice that answers a community need. The core identity of Kansas City Cancer Center is that the doctors care about the community—they are local and live in the community. Public outreach activities, underpinning this brand identity, make up a big part of its marketing initiatives. John Hennessy, executive director of the practice, comments, “Most people aren’t shopping for a cancer center before they get a diagnosis. The message we get out in the meantime is that we care about the community.”

Creating a marketable practice brand may call for renaming your practice. Bloomfield says she has helped a number of practices develop names that they can take to the market, noting that a practice name like Schwartz, Smith, and Goodwin, PC, may sound more like a law firm than a place for cancer treatment.

Once you establish your practice identity, use a graphic designer or advertising agency to develop a logo and a

distinctive way that your name will be used in printed materials and on your Web site. Every time your practice name appears, the colors and typestyle should be consistent.

Creating a tagline for your practice is also an effective way to promote a brand identity. Market research led Texas Oncology to adopt as its tagline: "More breakthroughs. More victories." Previously, believing that proximity and convenience were most important to patients, the practice tagline was: "Quality cancer care, close to home." A consumer survey conducted by the practice asked what was really important regarding cancer treatment. "Loud and clear, we heard the most important thing to patients was having the best chance of beating cancer," Paulson reports. This experience underscores again the importance of basing marketing initiatives on evidence instead of assumptions.

Tactics for Enhancing Brand Awareness

The following are examples of marketing tactics aimed at enhancing your reputation among consumers and building brand recognition. The most effective marketing plans deploy a variety of tactics to maximize results.

- **Web site:** The Internet now plays a big role in driving consumer decision making. Search engine optimization strategies, Google ads, and other Web-based marketing tactics often pay off with great return in building your reputation as a provider of cancer treatment.
- **Community events:** Become a sponsor of the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure; have a booth at the cancer prevention health fair; wear T-shirts with your practice name and logo at the American Cancer Society's Relay For Life. For example, every year the Kansas City Cancer Center cosponsors a fundraiser with the Kansas City T-Bones baseball club, with all of the proceeds going to cancer charities. During Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the practice partners with the parks department to turn all of the fountains in Kansas City pink for a week.
- **Billboards:** "Some physicians think of billboards as old-fashioned, but they are seen by a lot of people every day and can be very effective," says Paulson. Bloomfield suggests rotating placement—rent a billboard in a certain location for 2 months, then place the billboard message in another location in your area. Keep your message to no more than seven words—people cannot retain more content in a 3-second drive-by.
- **Newspaper ads:** Repetition is essential in print ads, so if you cannot afford to place an ad consistently, do not do it, Bloomfield advises. It takes five to seven consistent exposures before someone starts recognizing your brand.
- **Television commercials:** Television allows you to reach large numbers of people at a regional level. Purchasing air time well in advance can help lower the cost of television ads.
- **Radio spots:** Radio campaigns offer an economical way to disseminate your message, as air time costs a fraction of television air time, and radio stations often charge nothing for creative and production services. Radio stations

themselves have narrowly defined segments of listeners, so you can shape your message for a specific target market at select stations.

- **Speakers' bureau:** Find out who in your practice has stage presence and credibility on specific topics, and offer a list of experts available to speak to businesses, congregations, and civic clubs. Promote this availability directly with potential groups (follow up with telephone calls), on your Web site, and with community agencies, libraries, hospitals, and cancer organizations.
- **Public educational programs:** Offer a series of evening seminars on topics important to your market. Consultant Ronald R. Barkley, MS, JD, founder of Cancer Center Business Development Group in Bedford, New Hampshire, reports success with quarterly panel presentations that included outside experts addressing topics such as spirituality in cancer, the financial burden of cancer, and nutrition. Use a public relations professional to guide you on promoting the events.

Always keep in mind that marketing should focus on how your services benefit the customer, not on how good you are or how top-notch your equipment is. The message is not about your new PET scanner but rather about how the patient will benefit from the latest diagnostic technology or not have to go to different places for diagnosis and treatment.

Tactics for Building Your Referral Base

Build stronger relationships with physicians who already send referrals as well as potential new referrers. Keep in mind, however, that nothing compares to physician-to-physician interaction.

- **Pass on medical news of interest:** When you see a relevant journal article, send it with a personal note to the referring physician, or send an e-mail with the digital link.
- **Be visible:** Visibility is especially important for oncologists new to town. Spend time at tumor board meetings. Socialize, even briefly, in the doctors' lounge.
- **Pick up the phone:** Before your written report is mailed, call the referring physician to convey your impressions.
- **Make physician-to-physician communication easy:** Give out your cell number. Put an office system in place so that every physician can easily contact referring physicians personally, eliminating the hurdle of hunting for an e-mail address or telephone number.
- **Send newsletters and announcements:** Maintain a mailing list of all potential referring physicians. Send a postcard or introduction letter—photo and bio included—to let referring doctors know about a new practice associate or new technology or services you have added. Produce a brief newsletter summarizing cancer news of interest. As an example, Kansas City Cancer Center sends a letter every quarter describing all open clinical trials.
- **Provide education:** Work with hospitals to include cancer topics regularly on the schedule for continuing medical

education, or independently offer lunchtime updates on new cancer treatments or research.

- *Employ a practice liaison:* Hire a “customer service representative” to call on referring practices regularly to assess their needs and complaints, explain new clinical trials, and find out how the referral process could be improved.

Marketing at the Office

Make sure the office staff has specific training in customer service, including how to convey the branding message of your practice. Once all employees are trained, include this as part of new staff orientation.

Ask several people who have never seen your office to stop by and give you their candid first impressions. Pay attention to everything from the building exterior and signage to the carpet and magazines in the waiting area. Some marketing experts suggest changing your exterior sign periodically because over time it becomes “invisible” to passersby.

Measure How Well You Are Doing

Consumer surveys are excellent tools for measuring your reputation and name recognition compared with other oncology practices in your area. Although measuring brand awareness will not give you a dollar amount for return on investment, enhancing consumer recognition can lead to new patients. When a surgeon or primary care physician gives a patient two or more options of oncologists to see, a newspaper ad or billboard, whether seen by the patient or a family member, can make your practice top of mind in the patient’s decision-making process.

Marketing Budgets

There is no standard for how much a practice should spend on marketing. Some of your most important marketing activities will cost nothing. Among the factors affecting marketing budgets are how competitive the marketplace is, whether the practice has marketed before, and whether you plan to launch a marketing campaign for a new service or a particular target audience.¹

What about determining return on investment? Marketing strategists agree that a direct correlation between marketing expenditures and increased revenue is not possible in medical practice. “There’s not an easy way to measure it, because so many different moving parts affect it,” Paulson notes. “We follow the number of new cancer patients per physician and use that as a barometer of the success of our marketing programs.”

Reference

1. Anwar R, Capko J: 9 steps to a strategic marketing plan. *Fam Pract Manag* 8:39-43, 2001. <http://www.aafp.org/fpm/20011100/39nine.html>

Using Professionals

For major marketing efforts, you may want to turn to a full-scale public relations agency or marketing firm that can advise you on overall strategies and provide all of the services needed, such as survey design, graphic design, writing, Web site development, and media placement. This approach is expensive, however, so consider retaining professionals only to supplement the skills and talent you have in house. You may want to use a marketing consultant or ad agency to help you design a marketing plan and get you started, then decide what aspects of your plan need to be outsourced on a continuing basis.

As with choosing any professional, look for experience doing the things you want done, and talk to previous and current clients. For many marketing projects, you can work backward to find a consultant: If you see an ad you like, call the practice administrator and ask about the agency the practice used, how smoothly the project went, and if the practice would recommend the agency. Ditto with Web sites you like.

In creating a logo and practice identity, you should expect a good designer to spend time finding out what your preferences are and the image you want to convey to the community. Establish up front that you own the copyright to your logo and other design elements.

For advertising, marketing firms typically have negotiating experience in purchasing media time and space that will help lower your costs.

Be Nice

Although market research, strategic objectives, and promotion are essential elements of marketing, your own actions send clear messages to others about your practice. Curb complaints and negative comments. Set a positive tone with your own staff, hospital staff, your patients, and referring physicians. A negative comment can send a bad vibe and will be remembered by others who may know nothing else about your practice. Nurses at the hospital all too often receive the brunt of doctors’ disgruntlement, and everyone around knows it. Develop awareness about how your tone sounds to others. Even if you are in a large practice with a high-powered marketing plan, you are ultimately responsible for your own marketing.

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