



Healthcare Marketing

Emotion-based marketing in the healthcare industry

If you've ever watched a Hallmark or AT&T commercial, you know what it's like to be the target of an emotion-based marketing campaign. These commercials tug at your heartstrings, effectively linking love for friends and family to their products and services.

For the most part, the healthcare industry has moved away from such emotion-based tactics, viewing it as sentimental and perhaps a little incongruous with managed care's troubled public perception. In recent years, consumers have voiced intense concern regarding quality of care, access to care, and soaring costs of care.

As a result, many marketers have run screaming in the opposite direction, afraid to use emotional marketing strategies as they might open up even more controversy. Instead, we have become primarily focused on a feature/benefit approach. But have we forgotten what healthcare is truly about - making people's lives better?

Perhaps it's time to bring emotions back to healthcare marketing and advertising. Consumer sensitivity and emotional response play a huge role in healthcare, where trust and caregiving must inherently go hand-in-hand. You have only to think about the delivery of healthcare services for your parents, spouse, or children to realize that your emotions will play a big part in the type of buying decisions you make in the healthcare marketplace. So how does a healthcare organization incorporate emotion-based marketing into its overall strategy? And what emotions do people respond to in the healthcare industry?

Logical vs. emotional persuasion

To give you a basis of comparison, feature/benefit marketing treats products and services as commodities, comparing price, product features, or service levels. It asks the basic question: Will this product or service do the job at the least possible cost? Imagine going shopping for a new computer. Sales representatives often hand out a product specification sheet, listing the processor, hard drive space, memory, type and size of screen, and various other options.

Imagine doing this for a healthcare facility - listing the types of services delivered, costs of services, hours of operation, providers at the center. It would be very difficult to prepare such a point-by-point breakdown for healthcare services. How do you measure something as personal and caring as the delivery of medical services?

Emotion-based marketing is more complex, but can be much more effective and persuasive. Your organization creates an emotional bond with healthcare consumers and clients by identifying and appealing not just to basic needs, but a higher emotional response - the need to feel cared for, safe and secure, healthy and fit.

Some emotional drivers to consider

All people are driven by human desires, such as the desire to belong, to feel

attractive or respected. As a result, the most compelling experiences are usually emotionally *affective* - they touch your heart and create a lasting emotional association. Some of the most effective marketing campaigns capitalize on these consumer motives. Of course, sophisticated consumers need to hear more than the obvious "we care." So what are some emotional drivers to consider in a healthcare marketing strategy?

Fear. Unfortunately, a primary driver in the healthcare industry is fear - fear that there will be no access to healthcare services, that there will not be quality service for family members, or that the cost of services will be too prohibitive to gain access. A great threat to healthcare consumers is the rise in the rate of uninsured in America. Between 1996 and 1997, the number of uninsured increased by 1.7 million to 16.1% of the population - a disturbing trend given the relatively strong American economy. This fear can motivate consumers to seek appropriate healthcare coverage for medical services and emergencies.

Safety and security. Through your organization's expertise, prestige, and reputation you can provide healthcare consumers with a sense of security. Perhaps your organization's strong suit is stable management or outstanding research. Whatever the case, your product or service should be perceived as safe and reliable.

A huge security issue today is patient medical privacy. This issue applies to both consumers who want to feel that their medical history is confidential, and to healthcare IT specialists who are considering new software and technology. Healthcare organizations and technology vendors must assure patients and clients that privacy is protected through proper security measures and confidentiality procedures.

Trust. Trust is a major issue with patients. They want to feel that their providers care about them and will try to restore their health and ease their pain and discomfort. With consumer backlash against managed care, health maintenance organizations are having to re-build trusting relationships with their members. Unfortunately, they must overcome many HMO stereotypes that influence satisfaction ratings.

One sure way to build trust with patients is to increase the time spent in providing care. Currently, physicians may seem rushed due to increased managed care demands, but according to the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the average office visit is up by a minute or two to an average of 19-20 minutes. Increased time spent with patients not only increases trust, but can also affect the quality and satisfaction levels of patients, ratings that should then be reported to physicians. Many healthcare programs are even instating empathy training to endow all levels of staff with a "we are here when you need us" mentality.

Time and convenience. Today's society makes endless demands on people's time and energy. Patients want to turn to healthcare organizations that recognize their time is valuable, and provide them with convenient, easy access to healthcare services and specialists.

Likewise, executives at managed care organizations and healthcare delivery systems are looking for ways to streamline their labor-intensive and time-consuming processes, as well as reduce medical errors. They need vendors that can cater to these needs.

Frustration. On the other hand, not receiving quality products or services will definitely cost your organization currency in the form of customers. You simply cannot afford a negative impression. It's much too easy for consumers to find other providers or vendors in today's competitive healthcare field.

Many physicians have also experienced anger and frustration over their loss of autonomy and authority in making patient care decisions. As a result, to increase physician satisfaction, many health plans are returning decision-making back to physicians.

Loyalty. Having a worthy product or service is the entry level to the healthcare market. To keep customers in the long run, however, an organization must make a strong emotional connection. Forging these bonds will help them attain the pinnacle of marketing success - loyal advocates. Think of the Coke vs. Pepsi product competition. These two competitors have dedicated followers who have taken the taste test and made an allegiance to one or the other.

Strong emotion-based marketing transcends consumers' rational thoughts and appeals to their hearts, where most buying decisions are made, and bonds between the organization and consumers are established, built on trust. To do this, you must present an appealing emotional *experience* that consumers can connect with on a gut-level.

Don't make consumers work to make the connection. Let them know how to gain this benefit - e.g. during open enrollment, sign up for our health plan; ask your doctor about this drug; or come in for an annual check-up.

Learn from others

Here are some marketing slogans that may help you conceptualize your own emotion-based marketing effort and begin to see how your own strategy can take form:

Just do it: Nike - Nike goes beyond its athletic endorsements to present a creed that challenges consumers to re-examine their lifestyles, set goals and then go after them with all their hearts and passion. This is the quintessential example of effective emotion-based advertising, not an ounce of over-sentimentality or pandering to emotions.

Reach out and touch someone: AT&T - Focuses on the universal bond each person has with friends and family. The company not only recognizes this importance, but also helps you make this important connection.

We bring good things to life: GE - GE stakes a claim on creativity and innovation. If you want to endorse a leading-edge company, you know whom to turn to.

You're in good hands: Allstate - Dependable, competent, and knowledgeable agents. If you have an emergency and you're insured by Allstate, you have nothing to worry about.

average emotions

To launch an emotion-based marketing campaign, you must first know your

objective. To start, make a bulleted list of selling points, which drive home the emotional appeal of your product or service. To win approval from management, determine how your emotion-based marketing strategy will align with the company's mission or with the unique selling position of the product or service. Ask the following important questions:

- What rational and emotional aspects do you want to convey?
- Which basic human needs are fulfilled by your organization?
- What higher-level desires might your organization deliver to strengthen the consumer's decision to choose your organization over another?

Aligning customer service with your initiative

Failed customer service will work against your emotion-based marketing strategy. You cannot have a successful promotion if your employees' behavior sends the opposite message. An organization must show that it values its customers at every level and your organization must commit to customer relationship building. This means that your front-line employees must have the customer service skills to build consumer trust and confidence in line with the emotions portrayed in your marketing strategy. In the long run, this will help to ensure not only satisfied customers, but loyal ones.

Conclusions

Consumer concerns regarding healthcare vary greatly, but focus primarily on affordability, choice and quality care. These issues evoke an emotional response from consumers, because their health and well-being are at stake. An effective way for healthcare organizations to resolve consumer concern is to reach out to the very issues that resonate deeply with the American public and show that changes are being made.

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