



Healthcare Marketing

Experiential Marketing: Focusing on the Customer Experience

No one wants to market real-life healthcare services by associating with a movie like "John Q," a recent release that depicts a financially strapped family man played by Denzel Washington who takes an emergency room hostage when his son is denied the heart transplant he desperately needs to survive. Pretty dramatic!

The film evokes strong sentiments against the managed care system and presents a compelling, though dramatized consumer experience with it. The paperwork nightmare and red tape associated with the bureaucracy is displayed when John brings the hospital administrator a "victory" letter from the insurance company only to have her coolly reply: "you filed the wrong form." Although the movie had some great scenes, the critics seem to agree that the parts didn't add up to make a great movie. Some complained that it was nothing more than poorly scripted propaganda for a universal healthcare system.

But in a time when entertainment and its messages are ubiquitous, this movie is a good vehicle to discuss and illustrate a relatively new marketing concept that is becoming known as "experiential marketing," or marketing that focuses on the customer's experience. How can healthcare organizations create their own marketing messages that explore a more positive customer experience in the healthcare industry?

The old F&B marketing vs. today's entertainment marketing

At one time marketing focused on describing products and services in terms of their logical features and benefits. Marketers worked hard to define their niche within product categories and among various competitors. According to this system, consumers acted as rational decision makers who gathered information, carefully assessed a list of pros and cons, compared them against other products, and finally made a choice through this methodical process.

Does such a logical process characterize the typical purchasing process on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, or when a consumer is considering buying a Hummer? Maybe, among some analytical minds that enjoy filling in tiny bubbles on standardized tests, but according to experiential marketers, today's consumers want a product because they relate to the experience a commercial, ad, or marketing campaign has conveyed.

As products, as well as services, become commoditized, competing mainly on price, how can organizations continue to distinguish themselves? Primarily through the marketing of a customer's experience of the product or service. Take JetBlue, for example. The low-cost airline has been in business less than three years, but in a short time it has distinguished itself from other low-fare airlines like Southwest by marketing quite a different flight experience - roomy, leather seats and 24 channels

of satellite television.

Here's what one person had to say:

"I fly JetBlue all the time. The seats are bigger, beautiful and roomier," said David Kolin, who flew the airline from New York to do business in Los Angeles. "The in-flight TVs on the longer flights make it go quicker." (*Dallas Morning News*, Oct. 15, 2002)

Now there's an experience I wouldn't mind giving a try, especially during a time when feeling comfortable and even entertained in the air has been hard-hit by last year's tragedy.

Focusing on the customer experience can be a vital differentiator, especially as products become more technical in nature and more difficult to relate to emotionally. For instance, many consumers don't have the time to familiarize themselves with the technical features of mobile technology. So what was one way Palm got its Palm Pilot into the minds of consumers? Through the marketing of a romantic interlude (a.k.a. the infrared beam). Two people sit in separate trains, instantly attracted, but doomed never to meet again as the trains take off in opposite directions. Not necessarily. In Palm's TV commercial, one person merely beams the other a number. There you have it - you've experienced dating in the 21st century. The vignette is entertaining, and it doesn't talk about the technical capabilities that enable this to happen. Instead, the marketing message lets us experience the feature.

Experiential marketing focuses on the consumers as emotionally as well as rationally driven individuals. We have needs, but such a bounty of products exist to fulfill those needs that we then judge products on their ability to fulfill a second level - our wants. As a result, marketers are left with the task of showing how their products and services meet consumer desires, wants, fantasies and fun.

What is meant by an experience?

An experience engages the senses - sight, smell, sounds, taste and touch - to create an emotional and mental response. For instance, Jennifer Lopez has introduced a new fragrance. What do we know about the marketing of J.Lo? She's sexy, curvy and desirable. This type of marketing has made many people tune in and reserve an area of their minds for this new product. When we're walking by the cosmetics department this holiday season, we'll might be curious enough to accept a sample from the counter clerk. Does the scent match the J.Lo experience? I don't know yet, but my co-worker says it does. "It's sexy, smells like rain." Hmm. I'll have to give it a try some day.

But what does a sexy perfume have to do with healthcare? Today, many healthcare products are adopting mainstream marketing influences. Take Viagra. Its magazine ad reads, "To get more intimate with your partner, whisper those three words. 'See your doctor.'"

A marketing campaign that effectively captures an experience will make the individual relate and respond positively. Will they sign up for your healthcare service? Will the hospital administrator consider your program or technology? If you can effectively create an experience in the minds of your potential consumers, enabling them to relate to your product or service as part of that desirable

experience, then they'll be interested enough at least to check it out.

Here are some media that can effectively relay the experience of a current or past customer to a future potential customer:

Testimonials

Many healthcare organizations don't bother to ask their patients or customers for testimonials. This is an easy and relatively painless way to convey the experience of one satisfied customer. If a customer seems happy with your service or product, ask them what they liked about it. Ask them to be specific, but also make it as easy as possible for them to help you. Interview them, write it down for them, and have them review and approve it for your marketing materials. When asking for testimonials, suggest specific areas that they might address - such as quality care, time with a provider, turnaround time in getting back with them, or responsiveness to problems. Try to obtain at least one testimonial that covers each aspect that you address in your marketing material. Be sure to obtain permission from the customer to use his or her name and quotes.

Customer case history

Another way to objectively convey your customer's experience with your organization's products or services is through a client case history. A case history is a narrative account usually in a form that conveys a problem, solution and results. In reality, a case history is a more fully developed testimonial of how your product or service helped your client. In reading a client history posted on your website or run in a publication, a potential customer will relate to your current customer's experience and consider using your product or service if they have similar problems.

Joint interviews with your clients

Often, the media won't want to talk with a vendor or provider. Instead, they want to talk with a customer or patient. Their stories are often geared toward the patient/customer experience, and getting this perspective is the focus. As such, building customer relationships is important not only for continued business, but to also cultivate opportunities in which your clients might want to participate in a joint media interview about your product or service. Try to outline the big-picture benefit to those participating. For instance, if it's a patient, you might ask them to participate in an interview in order to help other patients get the care they need. Sometimes patients may agree to participate if they can remain anonymous.

Joint conference presentations with clients

Many of your potential customers may be going to the same trade shows at which you attend, exhibit or speak. As is the case with joint media interviews, clients also may be interested in doing a joint presentation to a group of their peers. They might like the distinction of presenting, or they might want to add it to their resume, but be sure to stress these benefits to them. If they agree to participate, it would be fair to offer to pay their travel, conference fees, room and board expenses. Another benefit: the client is attending a conference on your tab, where they can attend sessions and improve their education and knowledge in the industry.

Free media trial

If possible, another option is to let appropriate media contacts experience the

product or service themselves, with the hopeful understanding that they might, but are not obligated to, write a review somewhere down the line. Believe it or not, first-person media reviews of Viagra have been done. Some articles are written based on media contacts shadowing physicians using a product, or interviewing a provider organization that has implemented a new application or technology. Appropriate media contacts can live the customer experience in many ways.

What "experiences" do customers want in healthcare?

Today, we're in the era of consumer-driven healthcare, so focusing on the consumer experience is an important distinction at a time where consumers are becoming more and more involved in their own healthcare decisions. What experiences are consumers attracted to in the healthcare realm?

Convenience

Today, almost everything is driven and made easier by technology. We can shop online, receive immediate correspondence via e-mail, always stay in touch through cell phones, and take our work with us on laptops and personal digital assistants. These conveniences have become deeply rooted in the minds of consumers. They've come to expect immediate, customized service, even in healthcare. If your organization has proven its success in offering convenience to customers, don't be afraid to tout this highly desirable experience.

Quality

In regard to healthcare services for loved ones, consumers want the best. Your organization must stress the quality, best practices and positive outcomes it achieves both to get the recognition it deserves and to draw consumers to your doors. Today, more health plans are rewarding physicians for quality, and making quality measurements available to consumers via the Internet. This is a critical distinction, and one that many consumers would be willing to pay more for - in order to feel secure in the quality of care they receive.

Service

Today, services are becoming more of a commodity. To continue to distinguish your organization on service, you must show how your organization goes the extra distance for its patients or customers.

Choice

The managed care backlash has shown that consumers want choice. They want more say in their own healthcare decisions, and are using the Internet to get it. Patients research their conditions and possible therapies, bringing their discoveries to physician offices to discuss it with their doctors. Direct-to-consumer marketing shows that pharmaceutical companies are having great success in capturing "customer experience" with their drugs, portraying people that continue to live active, vital and healthy lifestyles through the use of their drugs. Does your organization offer the consumer choices and alternatives?

Care

Consumers want to feel as if they matter, and as a result, they want your time and attention. They want to feel as if you care about them, remember them, and

recognize their distinct needs. Portraying an experience in which your organization cares for, even pampers your customers, is very appealing in today's Internet-speed generation. In addition, "caring" should be second nature in the healthcare/managed care industry.

None of us has the marketing budget to create an anti- "John Q" movie, but there are ways to get your organization's positive customer experiences across, including the experiences of convenience, choice and quality. If you can succeed in developing the messages that highlight such experiences, you may be surprised at the results - both entertaining and intriguing your potential customers. The media to convey these experiences are relatively easy to develop, such as a customer testimonial or client case history, and are also fairly easy to distribute to the public - through the Internet and media relations. So why not experience "experiential" marketing yourself.

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