



Healthcare Marketing

Is your marketing program missing a key audience?

A sales person for a large medical device manufacturer is making a call on a key prospect. She knows the prospect; understands the company's needs and recognizes the selling points of the competition.

Her presentation is clear, concise and focused on key benefits - specifically return on investment (ROI) from other customers and ease of use. The prospect likes what he hears, but needs to do more research and talk to some other vendors. Later that day the prospect is reading a local trade publication. He sees an advertisement for the same company. The ad features a colorful, attractive image highlighting features such as compatibility with other systems on the market and "leading edge technology with unsurpassed capabilities to help you meet your operational goals." Where's the message on ROI he heard so much about just earlier that day? Confused at the seemingly different messages, the prospect turns toward another vendor presentation and closes the deal with a competitor.

Situations such as this happen routinely in the healthcare industry. Marketing departments develop creative advertising and marketing campaigns, often based on in-depth market research and discussions with project engineers and other key company sources. Yet somewhere between marketing and sales there is a disconnect and the messages communicated on the street during the selling process are often quite different than what were developed in the marketing office.

And it's not just advertising. On more than one occasion, it's the sales force that's the last to know about a new strategic partner or other company information promoted in a news release. While it's easy to point fingers and say, "It's marketing's fault," or "The blame lies with sales," a better move is to take the steps to ensure that messages and goals for advertising, public relations and sales are strategically aligned and effectively communicated to external and *internal* audiences.

Here are some key points for marketing and sales to keep in mind to ensure their messages are complementary, targeted and communicated appropriately to all relevant parties.

- **Listen.** No one should know the customer better than the professionals charged with selling to him or her. Marketing may have an innovative advertising campaign, or PR a great idea for a pitch to a trade publication, but sales may recognize that the market they must sell to needs a different message.

For example, perhaps the company has introduced a revolutionary software system and PR wants to send out a news release. Sometimes engineers get the ear of marketing, and the bells and whistles of functionality, which the

engineers are proud of, becomes the leading message when something as mundane as ease-of-use is what the customer values the most. The sales force can help provide strategic insights to marketing on what they believe will be of value and what will provide them with the best fodder for selling. This is not to say that marketing will do what the sales force tells them. It does mean that insights and analysis from this audience should be an integral part of a marketing campaign's development phase.

- **Educate the sales force on the rationale behind a campaign.** While the sales force can provide tremendous insights, they need to also recognize that the marketing team also has valuable ideas to share as well and that there is value in looking at fresh concepts and approaches.

"It may be easy for a salesman to simply resort to counterpunching the competition's claims vs. touting their own assets," said Scott Marber, a marketing industry veteran and partner at Associated Healthcare Consulting in Bellevue, Wash. "Furthermore, when the going gets tough, some sales people fall back on the simplest of sales points, price. Even though their product may have significantly differentiated and better features than the competition that warrants a higher price, they get anxious and try to sell on price." By educating the sales force on not only the message, but also the rationale behind it (e.g., competitive analysis, market research), sales will be better able to support and effectively communicate the marketing message.

- **Seek feedback from the sales force on a regular basis.** "Sales and marketing may start off on the same page, but over time the sales people find out nuances about what the customer is reacting to and bring it back to marketing," says Marber. "It's important for the marketing department to analyze feedback from sales and incorporate those changes into their messages and materials." In short, if marketing doesn't respond to feedback from sales, as time goes on the gap between marketing and sales messages may get wider. Sales people will then disregard the marketing efforts and actually subvert those efforts by handing out one thing and saying another.

Care should be taken to develop a formalized feedback system. Perhaps, your system comes in the form of monthly meetings or a suggestion box. Whatever the format, there must be a system to routinely secure feedback from the sales force, and promote this system on a regular basis. The most effective way to do this is to use examples in which actual sales suggestions have been incorporated into the marketing messages. This will show the sales team that what they're saying is making a difference and they in turn will be more motivated to use the system for future ideas.

- **Don't let shareholders or investors drive the message.** Whether a large corporation or a start-up venture capitalized organization, there are always members of the board, shareholders or investors with ideas on how to "improve" the marketing message. Often these ideas are worth evaluating. But it is up to the marketing department to listen, analyze and determine the best approach for the company - not simply one that will please an investor. Clearly that can be a difficult stance to take. But the ultimate obligation is to the company as a whole. A successful marketing campaign will rapidly quiet (or at least reduce) the suggestions from other company sources.

- **Ensure incentives are aligned.** Many companies have found it valuable to measure the effectiveness of a marketing campaign, by tracking the amount of bonuses and commissions paid out during the period directly following a new campaign. Another tactic - and one that many healthcare organizations don't use - is to provide bonuses to the marketing department based on the success of the marketing campaign.
- **Don't let your sales force hear company news on the street.** News releases, articles written by executives in key trade publications, advertisements in trade publications and other key marketing information, should be communicated to the sales force in a routine and timely manner. This is often a communication step that is simply overlooked in the rush to meet publication deadlines. Incorporating this step into the overall marketing plan can help ensure that it becomes a standardized step in the process.
- **Change the message or the messenger if needed.** If the marketing campaign isn't working, find out why. Is it not resonating with customers because the message is wrong? Or, does the sales force continue to rely on old sales techniques (price)? If so, perhaps they need more education or training on how to effectively present the message.
- **Walk a mile in their shoes.** One of the most eye-opening experiences many marketing executives can have is to spend one day with the sales force at least once a year. Some companies go beyond the sales staff to ensure that top executives go on sales calls. No matter who is involved, finding out first-hand what happens during the sales call can help marketing better develop messages and campaigns.

Finally, renew your commitment to communicate with your entire marketing and sales team. Most companies have programs to involve sales in one way or another with the marketing effort and vice versa. Yet many, may find that over time this commitment has lessened due to the day-to-to-day responsibilities and pressures of the job today.

But ensuring proper internal communication is one of the most fundamental tenets of a good marketing and PR campaign. Take time to review the current communication between marketing and sales and take the steps necessary to improve and enhance the dialogue between the two important departments. The result will only be a stronger, better-unified and effective marketing and sales program.

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