



# TOOLS & TIPS

## Laying the Foundation

### 10 Image-Building Tips for Effective Marketing

By Brent Campbell & Michelle Love-Johnson

**M**arketing is image-building and to achieve success in the home health care industry, you need to have a solid foundation and use the right tools and appropriate materials in constructing a marketing program. In the rapidly changing health care industry, taking a casual approach to marketing your company, product or services isn't likely to provide the results you want to see. To help create and implement a solid, effective marketing program, we offer the following suggestions.

#### 1. Define your market.

Understanding your target audience is a crucial part of building a solid foundation for all your future marketing endeavors. The focus is on trying to ensure that you are spending your dollars on attracting the customer who is most likely to respond, because if you craft the perfect message about the perfect product and send it to people who don't care, you're throwing your money away. You need to determine who your audience is in order to design marketing materials relevant to their preferences and priorities—and if you have several audiences to address, be sure to adapt your marketing strategies for each one.

#### 2. Understand customer wants and needs.

Market research is the other component of the foundation on which you can build an advertising and public relations program. How do current home health care customers view your company? What benefits of your product or service do customers and clients really need and want? Market research can help you find the answers and the most important research tool is the survey. Conducting a survey can help you glean the information you need to determine if your company is going in the right direction, and if not, what changes you need to make. Through a well-designed survey you can look at the strength and weaknesses of your business through the customers' eyes. The resulting discoveries can be incorporated into the way you do business as well as the way you market your business.

#### 3. Know your competitors.

Conducting a thorough competitive analysis is one of your most valuable marketing tools. It can help you gain insight into how your assisted care company compares, where you need to improve, and most importantly, what sets you apart. What are competitors' strengths and weaknesses? What are they touting in their advertising? What are their

marketing messages? This analysis allows you to determine what your company does differently—and better—than the competition, and that's the uniqueness that should be at the core of your marketing efforts. Some steps to take to make these discoveries include:

- Gather competitors' brochures, pamphlets, ads, direct mail and newsletters.

- Visit their Web site.

- Review and analyze the information gathered to get a better understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, products and services. Are they focusing on ease of use, quick delivery, unlimited supply, low pricing or service? What area can you focus on instead?

#### 4. Identify the value.

Whether the audience is physicians, hospitals, long-term-care facilities or consumers, what customers care about is: "what's the value to me?" Make sure every marketing component clearly points out the value to the target audience. This is one place that survey results will be helpful in showing you what your customers' needs are and what value you can offer them. You can more easily set yourself apart by touting a feature or benefit customers perceive as important. For example, if elderly consumers are the audience, do they value independence most? Convenience? The freedom to move around their neighborhood? If you have a chair that reclines for sleeping and lifts them to standing position (independence), or a walker that folds up to bring on an airplane (convenience), it's critical to make that value known.

#### 5. Ensure internal support and buy-in.

First, it's important to review internal alignment with your marketing messages. If the company publicizes good customer service and it takes hours to get a return phone call or three months to get their money back, your message won't be credible. Be sure to do what you say you will do. To achieve this, the goal within the home care company must be to have all levels of management and employees in support of the company goals and marketing message. That means everyone involved needs to know what those goals and messages are. It's important that employees believe in the services and products they are selling, that the product will make someone's life better and that the quality and the benefits are of value. This internal buy-in or sense of ownership plays a major role in the success of any marketing endeavor.

#### 6. Present the message in an eye-catching format.

In advertising and public relations, the brochures, direct mail, print ads, postcards, Web site, TV and radio spots are the building materials that bring you results. Be sure that all are up-to-date and provide a consistent reflection of your image and message. Look at available research to be sure you are focusing on the right points and in the right way. Some specific thoughts:

- Incorporate attention-catching graphics that fit the audience and message. For example, if you are touting freedom, independence and vitality, your brochure probably shouldn't be a drab gray.

- Always include a call to action listing Web site or phone to get responses.

- Utilize a variety of advertising outlets to be sure you reach all audiences, including: *Direct mail:* It can be effective if targeted to a specific audience and done in a creative, eye-catching way. An updated mailing list is critical to success. Premium items, dimensional mail and colorful envelopes get attention. *Web site:* For many customers your Web site equals your company, so be sure it reflects the message and values you want to portray, is interesting, interactive and easy to navigate. *Brochures and print ads:* Make them visually attractive, memorable and easy-to-read.

#### 7. Ensure proper placement.

Utilize the appropriate media for your message and audience. Look at publication calendars or get to know the editors to ensure the most beneficial timing, placement and pricing. If you are running TV or radio spots, someone in your company needs to understand flight schedules and rates to be sure your spots are in the time slot and on the stations where you'll get the most value. Or you could work with a firm that specializes in this aspect. It also can be effective to coordinate flight schedules with print ads so that if you're running on Sunday night TV, you also have an ad in the next day's paper.

#### 8. Track and measure results.

Reviewing demographics for publications, as well as radio and TV stations prior to placement, helps ensure money is spent where it will be most effective. It's one of your most important marketing tools. Include a call to action and coding in every ad to help identify what works. Phone numbers, dedicated extensions and Web site referral can assist in tracking the

effectiveness of the ad or commercial. If research is conducted prior to the launch and again afterward by either phone or mail, any change in audience perception can easily be seen and quantified.

#### 9. Incorporate public relations.

Utilizing public relations techniques such as special events, effective media relations and press releases highlighting special events or new products can bring positive attention to your home care organization, products or services at a minimal cost. Establishing relationships with publication editors and local media outlets increases the chances of event and press release coverage.

#### 10. Recognize your limits.

To ensure effectiveness of any marketing approach, it's important to determine early in the process whether you can "build it yourself" or need to call in an outside contractor. For this you will need to evaluate your internal resources. Does your in-house staff have the time and skills to do the work involved in creating and implementing an effective marketing program? Many home health companies find that it's more practical and cost-effective to call in an experienced firm that specializes in health care marketing for part or all of the work. The benefits of working with an outside resource include objectivity and experience. Generally it's advantageous to consider hiring an advertising or public relations agency if in-house marketing is not working efficiently or no one in the organization can devote enough hours to it.

Essentially, those are the building materials for constructing a vibrant, effective marketing program within the home care industry.

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