



Stand out FROM THE CROWD

Recent DH reports encouraging competition in primary care confirm what savvy managers have known for some time: competition and choice will be the big challenges for practices in the next few years. **Matthew Jane** finds out how you can keep your edge with effective branding and marketing



As the recession bites and the economy struggles to recover, businesses and companies are clambering over each other to secure deals and stay ahead of the competition. While general practice is fortunately not in this boat, the days of patients signing up with their nearest practice are a distant memory as increased choice and demand for improved services throws the field wide open and drives the need for practices to have an effective system of promotion and brand development.

"Marketing is changing dramatically in healthcare. Even ten years ago, the means of promoting a practice were hugely different to the techniques employed today," comments Robbie Hughes of Ascensus.

BUILD A BRAND

Developing a successful brand will help promote your message among your patient population. Not just about logos and colours, a brand is about building and maintaining a positive reputation. "It doesn't happen overnight," says Helen Drake at EMIS, "so a good place to start is to take a look at what your practice is already good at.

"Whether it's appointments usually running on time or smiling receptionists, or even use of IT savvy services like online repeat prescription ordering, look at your strengths and start thinking about how to make sure people remember them. It might be helpful to ask staff in the practice what they think and even the patients themselves," adds Drake.

Hughes believes that building a brand is about more than standard marketing, describing branding as "a layer of care and attention to detail that is core to the entire business".

As you develop your practice brand, Hughes suggests beginning with a theme or value statement. "Determine the values that are most important to your company and how you differentiate yourselves. The rest will flow from that.

"The key combination is to have a brand that shows a practice that is reliable and efficient therefore drawing patients in. These words need to be backed up as once they are there it is the quality and delivery of the service that they will ultimately return for."

Kate Griffiths, healthcare consultant at Sunflower Project Solutions, stresses the importance of understanding what a brand is, how it is created and how it impacts on the patient experience. "A brand may be described as a promise and the service is how well the promise is fulfilled. It is a reflection of all aspects of the consumer experience – good and bad – which for a GP practice may include the call waiting system, reception staff communication, website or clinical rooms for example. Therefore, understanding your practice as a brand forms the foundation for guiding and influencing the brand strategy."

Griffiths suggests healthcare marketing should start with the following:

- Research: it is important to have an understanding of your patients, including

the demographic, priorities and opinions.

- Define and differentiate: identify your strengths and what differentiates your practice from the competition. Be sure to involve all staff in drawing up a mission statement.
- Design: define the practice marketing strategy with messages that reinforce your positioning. Successful external marketing strategies include developing positive relations with local networks, websites and media solutions.

HAPPY FAMILY

One of the strengths of general practice branding is the association with the NHS. An alignment with an established and largely well respected brand can help add weight and respect to individual practice branding strategies. According to NHS brand guidelines, the NHS holds strong, positive associations and is regarded with great warmth and affection.

"Values associated with the NHS include integrity, respect and trust, commitment, dignity and compassion and high quality services and expertise," says Rosalind Dewar of GPsurgery.net. "With such high values associated with the brand many practices choose to simply adopt the NHS brand. If you do choose to go down the route of developing your own practice logo, our advice is to use it in tandem with the NHS logo so that you benefit from all that the NHS brand stands for."

As well as deciding whether to align with the NHS brand or not, practices should also be aware of the PCT services, according to Dr John Parry, clinical director at TPP. "If aligning, practices should brand in NHS corporate colours and styles and ensure coordination with PCT services/delivery standards. If they decide not to align with NHS identity or PCT services, they should build on their own strengths while ensuring they meet the needs of the patients they want to attract – although GPs want to best serve their existing patients, they also need to attract low-user patients to boost income and to provide headroom for new staff to develop new services."

However you align your brand, getting the initial logo drawn up should not prove too expensive, advises Dewar. "At the lowest end of the scale there are online →

logo design services that offer a low cost service with minimal investment required (from about £100). If you are looking for a more personal service ask around for recommendations for local freelance graphic designers who often work for reasonable fees (from £300 – £600). Then there are larger design agencies where you are likely to pay considerably more and will be required to put time aside for meetings and preparing a well-written brief.

“Whichever route you choose, you will need to make it clear to your designer how the logo will be used (letter, website, posters, uniforms, signage etc) and, if you are using the NHS logo as well, how you need the two brands to work together,” adds Dewar.

Hughes stresses that shelling out funds on logos is not the sole solution to a branding strategy. “Pay attention to detail,” he states. “Do not expect that because thousands of pounds have been spent on a new logo, it will create a brand. You can create a far better brand by ensuring that your patients are happy and well looked after than any amount of advertising budget will ever buy you.”

SPREAD THE WORD

Once your plan is in place, it is important to make sure the word gets out, although this message needs to be delivered in a carefully thought out manner. “A good brand is not about beating the client over the head again and again with the same slogan, it is about consistency of message and consistency of delivery,” says Hughes. “Identifying the message behind the brand and echoing it throughout the organisation will ensure that the client understands and believes in it. Practices should be aware of messages by

association which stand to benefit or damage a brand in equal proportion. BAA caused untold damage to British Airways with Terminal 5 at the outset, though one could now argue it is BAA that is benefitting from slick, unified operation that British Airways now deliver from that same terminal.”

Drake highlights an easy and straightforward way to get your message across. “You could produce a few simple posters to remind patients what you’re good at. Do you do anything that you didn’t realise could say positive things about surgery? If you always recycle all of your plastic and paper waste, let patients know.

“You could think about adding a simple strapline to your logo that relates to your key strength, such as ‘your friendly, local practice’. Use around the practice, on letterheads and your website if you’re online. Does your website have an ‘about us’ section? Make sure it includes the practice features that you have identified as your strengths,” continues Drake.

Having a branded look and feel in the practice is one possible way to promote the message. Cheryl Jackson of 4imprint suggests there are many areas where a logo or company colours could be incorporated to enhance the message, including cleaning sprays, pens, keyrings, clothing, and even

food boxes, sports bottles and pedometers. She stresses the importance of remembering to include your phone number and opening hours in any promotional material, to gain full value from your investment.

In order to get the best deals on any branded products, Jackson suggests keeping artwork and design down to a single colour. “This will keep costs down as multi-coloured prints are more expensive and some items can only be printed in one or two colours.” She also suggests ordering more items in fewer batches.

To spread the word even further, Dewar suggests contacting local groups and organisations in your area. She explains they “often have their own websites and are normally happy to list your surgery website address on their ‘help’ or ‘links’ page. Try contacting schools, clubs, Citizens Advice Bureaux, town hall, churches and libraries.”

Once you have a branding and marketing plan in place and the word is being spread throughout the local community, you should see a positive response in patient numbers and satisfaction, helping ensure you maintain your competitive edge in an increasingly competitive market. ❖

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