

## Oncology marketing:



## Tough times call for creative solutions

– Gary Woonteiler

The economic slowdown has affected all industries, and health care is no exception. Indeed, with declining reimbursements and other challenges, it's clear that oncology groups are not recession-proof, and many practices are cutting back in many areas – with marketing programs sometimes the first to go. This might be ill advised. Yes, times are tough, but the landscape is becoming more competitive, and if you pull the communication plug while competitors are still generating news, your brand will suffer and your outlook could become more bleak.

Whether you are a small or large practice, you don't necessarily need a big budget to tell your story to key targets. Rather, you need big ideas and creative solutions.

### Weighing the importance of marketing

Well before today's recession, even when the economy was thriving, many oncologists didn't want anything to do with marketing. Then the medical landscape started to change with new players, new technologies and new demands from patients. Suddenly, it seemed, marketing debates and campaigns were in vogue throughout the industry. Surgeons discussed market share, nurses reviewed logo treatments, and human resource managers pushed for radio commercials. Today, despite the

recession, marketing is woven into the fabric of health-care operations, and forward-thinking oncology groups understand what is at stake.

In fact, marketing programs can be critical to the very survival of hospitals and group practices. These programs typically involve many elements – public relations, advertising, Web sites, print collateral, e-mail blasts, special events, community relations, market research, etc. While some of these functions can be managed in house, they are often outsourced to health-care consultants, allowing organizations to avoid the cost of employee benefits and tap into the expertise of industry specialists. Consultants take many forms: It's not uncommon to work with a public relations firm, branding professionals, a Webmaster and graphic artists. How well these functions are integrated will affect the overall effectiveness of your marketing effort.



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So, should you proceed with that radio campaign mentioned above? That depends on your objectives and budget. Since cost containment is important, you need to avoid knee-jerk decisions and think strategically. While some matters in this business are subjective, most require the knowledge and experience of experts. For instance, if you're targeting primary-care physicians in a suburban community, a \$25,000 ad campaign on a major metro radio station is not the way to proceed.

## Planning

Even if you've identified a perceived need for a marketing initiative, it is prudent to first make sure your infrastructure is in place. Key to all marketing efforts is basic branding considerations, including your logo and tagline. But before you start reviewing treatments for a new or revised logo, you should perform some self examination and reach consensus on who you are. This understanding should lead to a mission statement and message points, which will serve as a platform for consistent communications.

Planning ahead starts with identifying your goals and objectives for the short and long term. Then you need to segment your audiences into primary and secondary markets. These might include patients, referring physicians, collaborators, hospital administrators, insurers, donors, employers, government officials, industry colleagues and vendors. Also, pay special attention to your internal audience – staff, trustees and volunteers.

Depending on your target market, different communication channels and messages are generally required, and your success might be tied to how well you customize your communiqués. For instance, a public service announcement (PSA) about prostate cancer screening might be a good way for you to reach the general public, but if you want to solicit donors to support cancer research, a direct mail piece and private meetings are much more effective strategies.

Just as your organization should have a business plan, you need a complementary marketing/communication plan that maps out objectives, targets, tactics, timetable and budget. Since circumstances will likely change in the course of a typical one-year program, you should anticipate contingencies. Regarding the ever-sticky question of budget, the question shouldn't be "what will this cost?" but "what will the value of this be?" Again, be creative: If you're a non-profit and are planning educational or public service programs, you might qualify for funds from foundations, government agencies or pharmaceutical companies. Also, for-profits might consider establishing non-profit foundations for such purposes.

Another approach that is gaining more traction is forming business partnerships. For example, community hospitals and cancer centers frequently collaborate with academic medical centers in ventures that fill service voids in the community and allow downtown hospitals to extend their visibility. In the pursuit of added value for both sides, the result is often a win-win proposition among seemingly unlikely partners.

## Implementation

At the heart of a marketing/communication plan are the tactics designed to reach constituents and realize objectives. The ideal plan is a blend of various tactics that are strategically sound and fiscally responsible. In determining the relative merit of different action steps, it is wise to weigh the trade-offs:

**Public relations.** Public relations (PR), narrowly defined here as relationships with print and electronic media, is a cornerstone of most communications programs. To begin a PR program, you need to develop a database of media contacts, have a plan to distribute timely material, and maintain a dialog following journalistic guidelines. Since you

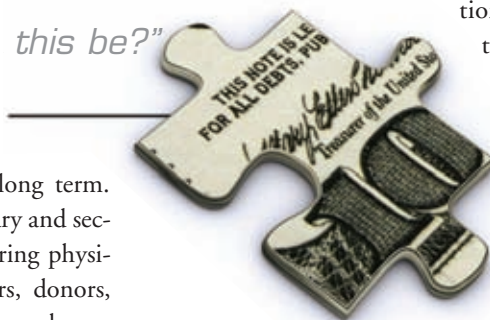
don't pay for editorial placements, this medium is considered credible and cost effective – especially in today's economy. But you have to *earn* your ink and air time, which means that your press releases must contain objective *news* and not be veiled promotions.

Along with news releases, other PR tools include calendar listings, PSAs, letters to the editor, and ghost-written guest columns. The latter, also known as bylined articles, are informative/educational pieces on industry issues and trends that routinely run in business and trade journals; they often take the form of "how-to" articles. Such pieces, as well as feature stories written by reporters, serve as excellent reprints and direct mail pieces, and they should also be posted online.

Media relations is an ongoing process, and results aren't guaranteed, but the value is often easy to gauge. As an industry standard, an editorial placement is considered to be worth more than double the value of paid-for advertising occupying the same amount of space.

**Advertising.** By advertising in print and electronic outlets, you control the words, images and timing of your communica-

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tion. While you don't have to worry about a reporter "getting it wrong," you do need to consider the sometimes prohibitive cost of media buys as well as the added creative costs. For a print, radio or TV ad to be effective, an extended flight of spots is generally required. If you're pursuing this route, you should ask your ad rep about value-added promotions tied to your ad. Also note that advertorials and infomercials, while they have the appearance of a genuine editorial or on-air programming, are still paid-for products; they might be considered when your message requires more than a sound bite.

Another alternative is outdoor advertising in the form of billboards and mass transit posters, in addition to advertising in malls or movie theaters. These can be effective means of making mass impressions if you're trying to reach many consumers, as is often the case among large health care facilities that in the past might have focused on less expensive physician marketing. Typically, the in-house troops get worked up about the prospects of making such a big splash... until they hear the sobering news that a three-month run of rotating billboards on the interstate highway costs more than \$30,000.

Among health-care organizations, recruitment advertising has become more important, given the shortage of physicians and nurses. Any recruitment program should consider not only print ads in community papers and trade journals but also contracts with industry headhunters and appearances at industry trade shows.

While public relations and advertising are often key parts of an overall plan, other vehicles should be part of the equation as well. Examples follow:

**Web site.** Almost all organizations appreciate that it is critical to drive customers and prospects to your Web site, which should serve as a real-time repository of information. But many executives don't realize that the service of Webmasters is limited since they seldom provide content. Webmasters generally are not marketers, writers or designers. So be prepared to feed material to Webmasters, whether through in-house staff or public relations counselors. Again, this begs the need for integrated marketing, and conventional wisdom is to limit your number of consultants. In any event, all news releases and articles as well as print collateral and ad creative should be posted and kept timely. An added tip: make your Web site interactive and post value-added educational material that will encourage visitors to return.

In addition to an external Web site, many larger organizations are setting up Intranets for internal communication. Both your public Web site and your Intranet should have a compatible look and feel, and the online branding should be consistent with your other marketing material.

**Collateral.** One of the oldest and still most reliable means of controlled communication is print collateral: brochures, annual reports, newsletters, fliers, invitations, on-site posters, payroll stuffers, etc. While brochures are typically one-time projects

(with a shelf life of at least a couple of years), newsletters, whether hard copy or electronic, should be ongoing communication tools (monthly or seasonal distribution to your database of contacts). Whatever the format and however impressive the production, printed material won't do you much good if it sits in boxes in storage rooms. Make sure you stack this material in highly visible racks in your reception area and share with appropriate groups. Also, consider a distribution and networking plan to ensure these pieces are working hard for you off site.

**Direct mail/e-mail.** When you want to cut through the clutter and put your brochure, newsletter, direct reply letter or "welcome wagon" in the hands of key contacts, direct mail is often the way to go, whether the audience is professionals or households. If you're sending a mailer to consumers, a trade-off will be the cost of postage to a mass audience. Another cost of larger mailings is the handling that may be required through a mailhouse – and the need to produce accurate mailing lists, typically in spreadsheets for the mailhouse.

One alternative to snail mail is the increasingly popular "e-mail blast" to your database. This allows you to make ongoing impressions electronically, thereby avoiding postage and mailhouse costs. Before you proceed with this, however, make sure you have access to your targets' e-mail addresses; also, check whether your IT department can handle the distribution, or inquire about turnkey distribution services. Another alternative is to insert your direct mail piece in daily or weekly newspapers. This might be less costly than snail mail but will have less impact since you'll be competing with many other circulars, etc.

**Special events.** Nothing beats the magic of one-on-one occasions to meet with your constituents and associates. These events include luncheons, ground-breakings, openings, fund-raising benefits, awareness walks, award ceremonies and much more. These also present opportunities for remarks, presentations, "schmoozing" and generating news. The flipside of such events? They consume an exhaustive amount of time (often necessitating the assistance of a PR or special events firm), and the effort might not be worth it if the anticipated audience doesn't show up. If you're targeting physicians, you know how difficult it is to attract them to out-of-office gatherings, so you might consider incentives such as CME credits, as appropriate. Even in the best of circumstances, when planning a special event, be mindful of the endless details and wary of Murphy's Law: If it can go wrong, it probably will.

**Cause-related marketing.** The latest research shows that consumers expect organizations to be good corporate citizens. For this reason, and to generate good-will, more and more large health-care institutions in particular are connecting with appropriate charitable causes, offering underwriting, in-kind contributions, volunteers, etc. For example, a cancer care center exhibits at a Making Strides event sponsored by the American Cancer Society (ACS) and participates in ACS Relays for Life.

Establishing a cause-related marketing program is also a great way to generate publicity. Just make sure you partner with a reputable charity and that your efforts receive the recognition they deserve. In other words, your logo shouldn't get lost in the shuffle with other corporate sponsors.

Finally, a word about photography. These days, everyone seems comfortable with digital cameras. Be advised, however, that for headshots, "grip and grin" publicity shots, and especially more sophisticated brochure images, the services of a professional may be required. If so, think ahead and line up as many shots as needed to make the most of the photographer's time.

The above tactics are tried-and-true examples that may or may not meet your particular needs, and this list is not all-encompassing. Other communication tools include blogging, corporate videos and CDs, displays, speakers' bureau, and a myriad of promotional incentive items as well as T-shirts and buttons to promote your organization and boost morale.

### Moving forward

Before you proceed with future marketing initiatives, you might want to review the following checklist with your senior management team:

- ▶ Has your organization reached consensus about who you are and what you want to communicate?
- ▶ What resources do you have in-house?
- ▶ What aspects of your program do you need to outsource?
- ▶ Have you determined how to recruit outside consultants?
- ▶ Do you have a point person to manage consultants?
- ▶ Are you ready to set aside time for periodic meetings and conference calls to review progress and possible adjustments?
- ▶ Have you established a streamlined process for timely approvals?
- ▶ How will you measure the success of your program and return on investment?

If you're engaging consultants, you need to be assured about their qualifications. But at the end of the day, the most important criterion to a relationship is chemistry. If you don't have trust, you don't have a bona fide partnership.

Finally, whatever the economic climate, keep in mind that marketing isn't a panacea in and of itself. The best branding efforts will be compromised if you don't deliver as promised to your patients and other customers. In this light, your operations should be reliable. And all of your staff should be apprised of your marketing objectives and serve as public relations ambassadors. **H**