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It's Time for Physicians to Own Their Brand



By Ross K. Goldberg

As sure as Disney, Apple, and Coca-Cola have brand identities, so too does every physician in practice today. The difference is that many physicians don't know it.

Individually or in a group, all physicians have brands. Some have been deliberately developed with an eye on marketplace differentiation, attracting specific patients or partnering with others with a shared set of values and mission. More common, however, especially for the sole practitioner, the brand has simply evolved over time. But the thought of letting someone or something else define who you are and how you are perceived is a dangerous proposition, especially in these times as competition for patients and profitability is more intense than ever. Clearly it is time for physicians to pay attention.

Strong brands approach the market with far more credibility than do their competitors when it comes to name awareness and trust. That is especially important in addressing the baby boomer generation. Members of this population are of growing importance to the health care community because of their numbers and their likely increased dependency on health care services as they live longer than any generation that has come before. Boomers have paid attention to the strongest brands, from Nike to Nintendo, and they want to apply the "trusted brand" model to their health care experience just as they do for most other interactions in their lives.

An emotional bond

Contrary to some misguided beliefs, a brand is not a logo, a product, or a slogan. Nor is it a clever ad, regardless of how long its shelf life or reach. Instead, a brand is a

promise, an expectation, and ultimately, an experience. For physicians, it is an emotional, sensory understanding of who they are rather than an intellectual, rational memory of a tagline or logo. Most important, it is about bonding emotionally with people in their daily lives.

Consumer decisions are made on promises that transcend products, and promises are rooted in human emotions.

If computers, cars, and coffee can make this connection, why not health care? After all, there is little in life more important, personal, and emotional to individuals than the health of themselves and their loved ones. During the past decade, and with increasing frequency, hospitals have begun to fully appreciate the power of a brand and have begun to take a critical review of their brand relevance. How their brand is perceived, communicated, and understood (or not understood) by the marketplace is now percolating on the agenda of most hospital and health system marketers and, fortunately, many CEOs as well.

Physicians and physician groups are a far different story. For the most part, the topic of branding is not even on their radar, and they are as hesitant as Bambi to take those first awkward steps. But one can argue that physicians (and physician groups) *even more so than hospitals* should make branding a top priority. Consumers have always felt a much closer bond to their physician than they do to their seldom-used hospital. As the nation enters a new era of health insurance exchanges and rating websites (including Yelp reviews), these same consumers are feeling more empowered in the selection of their care.

Six truths

For physicians, finding and defining their brand and voice is often a journey of business self-discovery. That's where health care marketers come in and why they are today needed more than ever. But to get physicians on board with the need, power, and effectiveness of a brand architecture, a few truths must be acknowledged. Here are six to keep in mind.

1. As uncomfortable, commercial, and counter-intuitive as it might feel, physicians need to begin to think of themselves as a product. Certainly, physicians are a lot more than that, and the intent is not to depersonalize or dehumanize health care. But thinking of a physician that way – and thinking of brands that are most trusted – will help physicians better understand the importance of a brand as well as the qualities that make a brand effective.

2. Physicians need to remember that branding starts on the inside. They, their partners, and their staff must be fully invested in believing in the brand and delivering on it *all of the time*. It must be valued, nurtured, and protected. It must become such a part of the texture of a physician's practice that both employees and patients become ambassadors for that practice or medical group. Others who join that practice must understand and live out the brand, too. That includes new physicians just out of medical school, physicians new to the community, or well-established practices that have merged or been acquired. The same goes for nurses and office staff, who are a critical part of the entire patient experience before, during, and after the direct patient engagement. It gets back to the promise that physicians are making to their patients, business partners, and themselves.

3. Physicians should learn to use size to their advantage. While it is the brands of the mega companies that are most obvious and make headlines, smaller businesses or individuals have an advantage because it's much easier for them to provide and control a consistent brand experience. People patronize local storekeepers and restaurants not just for the product or service, but also for the experience of getting it. Individual physicians, or those in smaller physician groups, are beautifully positioned to create a meaningful brand because of their intimate understanding of the communities and patients they serve.

4. Physicians today find themselves front and center relative to the changes in health care brought about by the Affordable Care Act, financial imperatives, and other market forces. But all too often change of any kind threatens to upend an organization's brand. If physicians let that happen, they will erode the equity and currency they have worked hard over time to build. Rather than letting that happen, smart physicians (with the assistance of marketing professionals) find a way to use change as an opportunity to enhance their brand and to reaffirm their role as a leading and trusted health care resource in their community.

Physicians should have a well-thought-out strategic approach to how they communicate change to their various constituencies and how they candidly discuss – in words everyone can understand – the road that lies ahead as a result of the change. Most important, physicians need to

remember that staying true to their brand is just as critical as any of the legal structures, human resource issues, information technology questions, and operational design decisions they are being forced to address in their quest to remain competitive and relevant.

5. Solo practitioners are disappearing as sure as the fountain pen and corner newsstand. Today, physicians who are employed by hospitals outnumber those who work in an independent practice setting. Even those physicians not seeking employment are opting to join with either multispecialty or single-specialty groups as a road to financial sustainability.

The ACA and its signature payment model, the accountable care organization (ACO), have provided strong motivation for hospitals to seek out physicians who are contemplating alignment, with good reason. While it is possible to become an ACO without a hospital, an ACO can't exist without physicians. Physicians who already believe they have a strong brand need to carefully consider how their brand will endure as part of a larger organization – or whether it should.

6. There is more noise than ever in the health care communications marketplace. But like car horns blaring on gridlocked streets, a lot of these sounds are being ignored. Physicians have the opportunity to rise above this noise through a branding strategy that speaks not only to their strengths but also to what the marketplace needs and wants. To do that, they needn't look over the rainbow or in some hidden valley. Instead, physicians should simply ask themselves three basic questions: What do I do well? What do my patients value? What personal attributes and unique characteristics of my practice can I own over time? Physicians should think of those questions (and answers) as three linked circles. When they look at the area where those three overlap, they will have found their brand.

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