



marketing minute

Brand Your Practice Creating a brand is a way to make your practice stand out from its competitors. Successful branding involves making a promise to your patients, keeping it, and letting the public know about it.

BY JULIE K. SILVER, MD



If you look at what is happening in marketing these days, you will find that branding is about as hot a topic as there is. In the book *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, authors Al and Laura Ries pose these questions to readers: “What is the single most important objective of the marketing process? What is the glue that holds the broad range of marketing functions together?” The answer, of course, is branding.

Although the concept of branding may be the cur-

rent marketing buzz word, this is really a very old topic. Ancient artisans used symbols to brand their work, and ranchers in the old west used branding to keep track of herds. Branding as a marketing strategy dates back to the post-war frenzy when people finally had money to spend and consumers had more choices for goods than ever. Americans were feeling loyal and business executives realized that they could capitalize on this by branding

their products. It worked incredibly well for many companies (think Chevrolet, Fruit of the Loom, 7-Up, and McDonald’s).

Obviously these brands bring to mind very different products. So, what exactly is a brand? According to Al and Laura Ries, “Any proper noun is a brand. The power of a brand lies in its ability to influence purchasing behavior.” Another definition comes from John Mariotti in his book *Smart Things to*

Know About Brands & Branding. Mariotti defines a brand as, “a simplified ‘shorthand’ description of a package of value upon which consumers and prospective purchasers can rely to be consistently the same (or better) over long periods of time.” Essentially it “distinguishes a product or service from competitive offerings.”

It is easy to see how products might be branded. For example, think about a huge stack of bananas. Which ones to choose? What about the ones with the little Chiquita sticker on them? From past experience you may recall that they are usually fresh and delicious. In

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this instance, a product that may appear to be exactly like the competitors' products is distinguished by the brand alone. Many other products might be slightly different and the brand will denote this difference (e.g., cigarettes and alcohol are good examples).

Branding a service

But how can a service be branded? It is not as easy as a tangible product, but recall as great examples such names as E-bay, Fed-Ex, and Sprint. All of these provide a service, yet they are easily recognizable due to the branding effort. You may be wondering how branding translates to health care. The Mayo Clinic is a wonderful example of successful health-care branding.

Mariotti says The Mayo Clinic is incredibly successful because "it has several attributes that contribute to strong branding." He names the following reasons: 1) It has been serving its customers (patients) a long time, and has extensive staff, research and facility capabilities; 2) It has been successful and a good service provider, thus it benefits from word-of-mouth referrals—it has a great "brand reputation;" 3) It has paid attention to what it stands for and largely been consistent about delivering on its brand promise; and finally, 4) It has been proactive about sharing medical information with the public in many ways such as through its Web site, publications, and interviews.

Group practices or individual doctors can be branded as well. According to Jack Trout, the president of Trout & Partners, a prestigious marketing firm with clients

such as AT&T, IBM, Merrill Lynch, and Sears, "Doctors are no different from anything else that can be marketed." Lynch, who wrote the book, *Differentiate or Die*, believes that doctors need to differentiate themselves to remain competitive. He says, "What you don't want to do is pursue an 'everything for everybody' strategy. You need to focus." In his book, Lynch writes, "If you ignore your uniqueness and try to be everything for everybody, you quickly undermine what makes you different."

Lynch gives the following examples of how doctors can differentiate themselves:

- 1) Reputation is one way. "Where you went to school. Whom you work for such as an NFL team."
- 2) Specialty is another way. "How many operations you perform."
- 3) Preference is a third way. "Any studies that rate doctors."
- 4) Better care is also a way. "You pay more but you receive better care."

According to Lynch, the way to get started branding your practice is to decide how to differentiate yourselves and then to promote this idea in association with your chosen name. For example, Lynch says, "A group can build a brand around a specialty such as eye care: We have the leading doctors in the area, and we offer more services."

Mariotti notes, "A brand is a promise of a value that can be relied upon. It is also a relationship, and one that is based on trust." Therefore, Mariotti suggests that doctors think about "The most important promise

[they] can make that [they] can keep with confidence." For example, a group of oncologists can't promise to cure cancer, but they can promise to be focused on the "quality of life" during treatment. Similarly, Mariotti says, "Sports medicine doctors can't promise help with enhanced performance, but [they] can promise help with fitness and capability."

Building a brand

For a great step-by-step plan for branding, check out Duane Knapp's book, *The Brand Mindset*. Knapp suggests that doctors build what he calls a Genuine Brand rather than simply choose a name. Knapp says, "To build a Genuine Brand that is distinctive and commands attention from both consumers and professional colleagues, medical professionals must follow several crucial steps. First, the brand must be carefully assessed in order to characterize the current image and perceptions held by its core customers and influencers. A Brand Promise must then be developed as a pledge of value and benefits and a Brand Blueprint designed to provide a detailed plan for communicating the brand. Brand Culturalization should be instilled throughout each associate to unani-mously and consistently promote the brand and a Brand Advantage created to leverage the distinctive equity in the brand."

So the initial steps in branding are to figure out how you want to differentiate yourself and what promise you want to make to patients. If you decide to choose a name and a logo

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(which is optional) Knapp suggests that you consider the following:

Availability. Ensure that the name is available by conducting a trademark search and an Internet domain name search.

Protectability. Consider registering the name with the United States Patent and Trademark Office.

Acceptability. Make sure that the name is acceptable in all cultures.

Uniqueness. If you want to test whether the name is easily recalled and does not have any negative associations, you can hold focus groups or do a survey of your patients.

Credibility. The name should be believable and appropriate.

Legibility. The name should be easily reproduced within all media and other communications (e.g., pamphlets, etc.).

Durability. It should have the flexibility to withstand changes in the culture and economy over a period of time.

Compatibility. The name should work easily with other information likely to be in close proximity.

Creating a brand for your practice definitely takes some time and a well thought-out plan. There is no way to do this without really assessing what promise you want to make, how you want consumers to perceive you, and how you can achieve the goal of having would-be patients recognize your practice as “the” practice to go to. Knapp comments that, “Brands help consumers sort through a crowded marketplace and pinpoint the product or service that will best meet their needs whether it be a discount store or a doctor.” He goes on to say that, “Doctors who offer a distinct perceived advantage gain an authority and stature in consumers’ minds.” As the health-care arena becomes more and more competitive, consider creating a brand for your services in order to stand out as the doctor or group of doctors who provide the best value and whose promise patients can count on. ■

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