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Boost revenue by tapping an untapped resource: Doctors

By [Kate Madden Yee](#)

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When allocating funds for marketing and promotion, imaging administrators and managers often make the mistake of focusing solely on reaching out to new customers. But tapping into a facility's base -- particularly the doctors it already counts as clients -- can be the difference between a mediocre fiscal year and a great one.

Mary Ann Waldron, president of Traction Business Development, an imaging center development consulting firm in Fallston, MD, and colleague Kurt Snyder, vice president of business development, offered imaging center and hospital administrators key ideas to help them connect with the doctors they already serve at the 2007 American Healthcare Radiology Administrators (AHRA) meeting held in Orlando, FL.

Radiologists' role has changed dramatically in the past few decades: Where they used to function as consultants to primary physicians, the healthcare terrain has changed so that now they're called upon to take a more proactive role in patient care, while also juggling a new medical paradigm -- one that emphasizes patient education and the patient's right to choose providers and procedures.

"Nationally, someone else besides the doctor is often deciding what kind of care a patient should receive and where the patient should go for it," Waldron said. "Doctors are less and less in the driver's seat."

In this climate, Waldron and Snyder suggest that directly marketing a facility's services to the doctors it serves can boost these doctors' sense of choice and decision-making power.

How to reach physicians? Marketing to doctors may carry particular quirks, Snyder said, but doctors are consumers, and respond to the same factors the rest of us do. Direct mailings and e-mail are still effective. And the mailing or the e-mail may not be to the office, but to the doctor's home.

"Direct mail is still pertinent, and its use continues to grow despite the Internet," he said. "Use direct mail to get engagement -- maybe a follow-up call or an e-mail address -- and go from there."

The classic direct marketing principles include reaching out to the right person at the right time with the right offer, Snyder said. Doctors are thinking about their business needs as well as their patients, which adds another layer to communication with them. Whether the initial contact is with the doctors themselves, or their secretaries or office managers, it's crucial to write copy that's clearly directed to the audience and includes a call to action, answers to frequently asked questions, and contact information -- after all, the direct mailing is a virtual sales call.

"Even if you're a great writer, hiring a professional copywriter to work with on your direct marketing project is a smart move," Waldron said. "These folks are trained to calibrate their writing to their audience and bring results."

Communicate to doctors in their voice rather than in a corporate voice -- in other words, find a physician champion to send out the facility's message, much like a group of doctors might swap helpful information around lunch in the hospital cafeteria.

"When you've gotten an M.D., you've been through something that only other M.D.s can understand," Snyder said. "There's a level of respect between doctors that you can access in your marketing message."

Emphasize what sets the facility apart in the market rather than claiming to be the best, Waldron said. After all, stellar quality of care is expected as a baseline in the imaging industry. But if the center offers a particular service, such as a multilingual staff in an area with a lot of Spanish speakers, or protocols that make the primarily elderly patient demographic more comfortable with exams, emphasize those things in the direct mailing.

Offering direct mail or e-mail recipients a premium, in the form of a white paper, a link to an article or Web site of interest, or a consult with an industry leader, will often boost response percentages.

Consider coincidence

Many freestanding outpatient centers already try to take advantage of coincidence with flash faxes about daily open appointments for imaging exams that doctors might order if they're seeing a patient who needs it right then. And many facilities tie their promotional messages around medical organization calendars, like the American Cancer Society, emphasizing their PET/CT and MR imaging services, say, during Lung Cancer Awareness Month.

"Challenge yourself and your staff to think about coincidence," Waldron said. "Don't underestimate coincidence."

There's a place for face-to-face

Face-to-face contact still has its benefits, of course. Waldron suggests taking the tack of trying to understand a physician's referral patterns -- not to tell them how to take care of their patients -- and asking them why they don't tend to order particular exams that could ultimately improve patient care.

"You have to be willing to be the squeaky wheel," she said.

For face-to-face visits, consider hiring an experienced marketing person and training them on the medical information, rather than using clinical staff like technologists or nurses, Waldron said.

"It's often more effective to buy sales talent and teach them what they need to know clinically rather than using clinical staff and trying to teach them marketing," she said. "For example, throughout their careers, nurses aren't rewarded for challenging doctors, and now you're asking them to do that. It doesn't really work."

Dos and don'ts

Finally, Waldron and Snyder offered a few quick dos and don'ts to help facilities keep on track with their direct mailing marketing efforts.

Do:

- Work backward. Be able to track exactly what each marketing dollar accomplished.
- Be outrageous. Remember the entrepreneur who named his long distance phone company I Don't Know, You Tell Me, because during the phone company wars of the 1980s and 1990s, he discovered that almost 50% of customers dealing with a phone operator who asked, "What's your long distance company?" used just these phrases.
- Test everything and trust the results. Quantify the facility's services so that what's effective can be tested -- and then take the results to heart.
- Measure marketing efforts so that accurate tests of each strategy can be tested.
- Conduct anecdotal market research.
- Be able to answer the question, "So what?"

Don't:

- Underestimate the savvy of direct mail recipients. No one likes to be condescended to.
- Mark mail "Personal and Confidential." It's a sure credibility-breaker.
- Use jargon.
- Forget to provide contact information.
- Forget that each piece of marketing outreach creates a first impression: Even if three mailings have been sent out, this could be the first one the client has received.
- Thank the recipient. Thanking the reader for taking the time to read a direct mailing letter puts the facility in a position of insecurity. Instead, state what the facility provides with confidence and thank the client after they've used the center's services.

When done with savvy, direct marketing can save time and money, not only in dollars but in human resources, according to Waldron.

"If direct marketing techniques can help your existing marketing team be more effective, that's great," she said.

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