How to Avoid
The 7 Deadly Sins of Healthcare Marketing

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“First, do no harm”

It would be a surprise to many that the familiar words, “First, do no harm,” do not appear as part of the Hippocratic Oath.

The father of modern medicine did, however, put forward a similar idea in one of his writings, which translates as:

“Declare the past, diagnose the present, foretell the future; practice these acts. As to diseases, make a habit of two things — to help, or at least to do no harm.” Hippocrates

And by any translation, this is a concept that we’ve found to be popular with many professional practitioners when they seek our advice and guidance in Healthcare Marketing. If nothing else, they want to do no marketing harm…they are actively looking at ways to avoid mistakes. And that’s a good first step.

Whether you’re marketing a hospital, a private practice, a pharmaceutical company or any other healthcare-oriented organization, it can be challenging – even painful – if you don’t approach it with the right knowledge, tools and guidance.
“Avoid mistakes... then diagnose, take action”

By taking a lesson from the pitfalls and errors of others who have learned the hard way, you can boost your effectiveness and take the first of two leaps toward greater success.

In our collective decades of marketing experience there are 7 deadly sins that must be avoided in an effort to do no harm. First, recognize and avoid these “Seven Deadly Sins.”

Deadly Sin # 1: Confusing Marketing with Advertising

Don’t use these terms interchangeably; they’re cousins, not twins. Marketing is a systematic plan of many business activities that collectively work to attract and retain individuals who are in need of your services or products. Advertising is just one of many communications tools; typically a persuasive message that targets a specific audience.

Although healthcare marketing and advertising can appear daunting, the success steps for any organization are six, and only six, fundamental building blocks. These are: Professional Referral Marketing, Internet Marketing, Branding, Internal Marketing, External Marketing and Public Relations. Understanding this simple outline allows everything else to fall into its proper place.

Deadly Sin # 2: Spaghetti Marketing

Effective marketing is planned communication, so create and follow a well-considered and specific plan. When you market without a plan, it’s like throwing strategies against the wall to see what sticks. We call that “spaghetti marketing,” and it can be truly brutal on your budget and your organization. Plan your marketing carefully, preferably with the guidance of experienced professionals who know the ins and outs. They can steer you toward the tactics that are proven to work in any given situation – and help you steer clear of the things that will fall flat. Continue to adjust your plan as you learn, but don’t start throwing spaghetti at the wall. Plan first, then execute.

Deadly Sin # 3: Analysis Paralysis

People who work in and around healthcare tend to be scientifically minded, analytical thinkers. That’s great when it comes to practicing medicine or supporting it, but not so great when it’s time to launch a marketing campaign. Sometimes analytically-minded individuals think so long and hard about what to do that they confuse thinking with action. Thinking and planning alone don’t attract patients. Actions do. So you must set a short deadline for making decisions, and then once you have that decision, you must take charge and do something! If this is difficult for your decision makers, remind them that no marketing strategy is forever. You can make improvements next time. Analysis paralysis is dangerously similar to...
Deadly Sin # 4: Marketing Decisions by Committee

We aren’t sure why, but when it comes to marketing everyone seems to have an opinion. Partners, staff associates, spouses, patients, friends and the guy who cleans up all want to give their two cents.

Many a healthcare organization has put valuable marketing plans aside because key players couldn’t agree on the minute details involved in executing a plan. When you wait for complete agreement, you may find yourself waiting idly by as competitors beat you to the punch. Even when you finally reach a group decision, the result is often a watered-down version of an effective vehicle that will wind up doing little or nothing to accomplish your growth goals.

The solution is for your key decision makers within your healthcare organization to come to agreement on objectives and budget, and then engage a qualified third party to write a marketing plan. Once the plan is approved, if you don’t already have one, you’ll need to appoint ONE person within the organization to take on the role as “Marketing Director.” Empower him or her to make all decisions and approve the elements of your campaign, and evaluate his or her performance periodically based upon results.

In this manner, you’ll avoid massive hassle and lost opportunity.

Deadly Sin # 5: Inadequate Training

If external advertising is a part of your marketing campaign, it’s vital that you make every member of your organization, across all departments aware of the plan and ensure they receive excellent training in the handling of these new patients. Advertising generated patients will naturally be more skeptical and hesitant than referred patients. They will come to your organization or practice with different questions, mind-sets and concerns than the patients your staff is accustomed to.

That’s not to say that advertising can’t attract “quality” patients, or that advertising makes you look “needy.” Patients who call you from advertising are in fact the same people you are used to attracting. The only difference is that because there was no referral, there is no implied trust, so you’ll have to work harder at the outset to build relationships quickly.

This is a vitally important topic, and we’ve seen hundreds of otherwise good marketing plans dashed upon the rocks due to inadequate staff training and preparation.

Deadly Sin # 6: Treating Marketing as a Cost Center

Marketing is a revenue center, not a cost center. You must treat it as such.

That means you need to be willing to give marketing sufficient budget and time to succeed. More importantly, rather than focus solely on how much a given marketing vehicle costs, you’ll need to consider what it returns compared to its cost.

Is $25,000 for a given tactic or strategy expensive? Not if it brings your hospital or practice $125,000 or more in revenue!

From today forward, always calculate projected and actual Return On Investment (ROI) figures (simply dollars in divided by dollars out). Marketing that works is actually not a cost at all, it is an investment.

Your goal should be to find strategies with a 3:1 to 5:1 (or better) ROI. When you do, you should generally invest more in order to make more. In the end, you’ll multiply your winnings by creating successful, ongoing marketing systems. (Try to get returns like these with your mutual funds.)
Deadly Sin # 7: Insufficient Delegation

A well-designed marketing plan includes countless moving parts. Don’t try to oversee everything yourself. Delegate tasks and use the resources at your disposal to make your marketing efforts blend seamlessly with the operations of your business.

Call a staff meeting. Make sure everyone understands your vision and strategy. Pick the right people to lead appropriate tasks. Hint: if everyone is responsible for a given task or outcome, no one is responsible. You need to assign specific tasks to specific people with specific deadlines.

If you are working with an outside marketing agency (generally you should), you’ll want to delegate as much as you possibly can to them, but at the same time help them to help you. You’ll also need to agree exactly who is going to do what.

More Deadly Sins...

We wish we could stop at 7 Deadly Sins, but the truth is, there are several additional egregious marketing sins that you would do well to avoid.

Deadly Sin # 8: Inconsistency

Decide why your hospital, company or practice is better, and then make sure the messages you convey are consistent with that end. Patients will lose trust in your organization if they find you offer less than they were led to expect. Also, be consistent with your marketing plan. Don’t stop running a newspaper ad just because the first insertion didn’t ring your phone off the hook. Give your campaign time to work, but you also need to know when a change in direction is a good idea. Generally, you’ll want to get expert help in this area because there is nothing like the voice of experience to guide you.
Deadly Sin #9: Failure to track the source of new patients

In Sin #6 above, we discussed the urgent need for you to consider Return on Investment (ROI) for all of your marketing decisions.

However, if you don’t track the source of every new patient, you’ll never be able to determine the effectiveness of each of your various marketing tactics, specifically.

As a result you could easily stop something that unbeknownst to you is actually a home run, or worse, keep throwing hard-earned money at a losing proposition.

In spite of their protests, you MUST convince and then train staff to track the actual source of every new patient, from the very first call into the office. Once you have patient data, you can easily go back and calculate approximate ROI by strategy.

Only then will you be able to make smart decisions about marketing going forward.

Deadly Sin #10: Hiring the wrong marketing talent

It is always difficult to evaluate someone from outside of your own area of expertise, and marketing is an area that is particularly problematic.

The trouble is, a lot of marketing people “show well,” but quality varies wildly. Heck, even VPs of Marketing often fail in their assessments of marketing talent.

Here are some of the most important things to look for:

Healthcare Marketing Experience: Healthcare marketing is a small, specialized niche, and few people are truly experts. Look for experience with at least 100 healthcare clients, and thousands are a lot better.

Marketing Strategist: You don’t need a graphic artist, writer, salesperson, marketing administrator, web person, media person, etc. These people (assuming they are good) have very specialized expertise and are best suited to be part of the larger team, led by a marketing strategist.

Continuing Education: You need someone who is committed to continuing education in order to master his or her craft (books, coursework, seminars, newsletters, etc.). You do NOT want someone who hasn’t opened a book since college, or worse, never went to college.

Results Orientation: One of marketing’s dirty little secrets is that few marketers have any real experience selling anything. Worse, being creative people, they think they are successful when they win awards for being clever (silly us – we thought you were paying for results.)
Deadly Sin # 11: Trying to be a “do-it-yourselfer”

At the risk of seeming self-serving, we strongly recommend you avoid the temptation of trying to do all of your marketing in-house. There are several reasons why…

First of all, this is your reputation we are talking about. Nothing should be more important to you. Remember, people make judgments about what they can’t see based upon what they can see. Similar to how you make judgments about restaurant quality based upon the décor and cleanliness, people make judgments about you based upon your marketing. Amateurish efforts will make you look, well, amateurish.

Secondly, while “feel good” marketing seems relatively easy, getting patients off their lazy chairs to pick up the phone and call you is hard. Really, really hard. In fact, few marketers can do that, so your chances of success are slim indeed.

Finally, it really won’t save you money, which generally is the sole reason for keeping everything in-house. Bad marketing costs exactly the same to print or run in ads as good marketing. Worse, chances are you won’t redo bad marketing, you’ll simply quit. Which leads us to the worst sin of all…

Deadly Sin # 12: Doing nothing

From time to time, we’ll speak with a doctor or a hospital executive who proudly tells us, “we’ve never had to do much in the way of marketing.”

Actually, as Erik Spiekermann once said, “You cannot not communicate.” If you are still in business, you are marketing. You may or may not be advertising, but we assure you that you are marketing.

The only question is, “How effective are you?” After all, in today’s world, consumers are exposed to over 3,000 commercial messages a day. A day!

That means you are competing for mind share with marketing and advertising agencies which control multi-million dollar budgets. Worse, and this is new, you are now competing with colleagues who employ sophisticated marketing companies to get their messages out. (Call (800) 656-0907 for a free white paper on this topic.)

The business of healthcare gets harder every year, and competition has become a huge factor for thousands of organizations and practices. Doing nothing is equivalent to denying a battle is raging, and then choosing to stay unarmed.

The worst part? It’s the opportunity cost. Unless you take action, you’ll never know what “could have been.”

Word to the Wise

Now that you know what pitfalls to avoid, waste no time in designing and implementing an effective marketing plan. Simply beginning the process can seem daunting. Don’t settle for avoiding mistakes; begin now – right now – with a self-audit.
Your Marketing Audit: The first seven questions…

There are several hundred probing questions to ask yourself and others, but here are the first seven to begin an honest self-examination:

1. **Are you using an Evidence-Based Marketing approach?**
   
   Does your marketing system include Proven Strategies, a well-designed Marketing Plan, Effective Implementation and a means to Evaluate Results? All four of these components drive the process. If you're missing one or more you are not operating at maximum strength or capturing full potential.

2. **What’s the date on your marketing plan?**
   
   Even carefully-considered plans become dated if they are not challenged routinely – at least quarterly. If it’s been six months or more since you took a fresh look at your marketing plan, carve out some quiet time to evaluate. Do you need “refreshment” or a completely new course of action?

3. **Do you have clear and specific goals?**
   
   Not everyone is clear about the marching order of these terms – goals are quantified and at the top; strategies support goals; and tactics implement the strategies. How have your goals changed? What are the new goals and how did you set the goals? What strategies and tactics are needed to achieve the goals, new or otherwise? Did you realign your budget for what’s changed?

4. **Is your marketing budget right for the job?**
   
   There are no less than six different methods for setting a marketing budget. How did you set your budget and does it achieve the goals? Do you have enough resources – time, dollars, people – in the right places to make this a winning plan? Above all, marketing is a revenue center – not a cost center. Expect performance of 3 to 4:1 overall. (See item #7.)

5. **Does your branding message clearly differentiate your organization or practice?**
   
   If you are the “only game in town,” branding and positioning for your institution might go unchallenged in the marketplace. But increased competition means there’s no sliding by – patients and community need to clearly hear and understand exactly how you are different and better. Do you have a branding message?

6. **Are your Internal, External and Professional Referral programs working together or independently?**
   
   Some components of a well-tuned plan run all the time, while other segments may be seasonal, and still others are keyed to a target audience segment or needs. Does your plan coordinate all these elements, providing desired overlap or avoiding conflict?

7. **How do you measure response and Return-on-Investment?**
   
   Sadly, many hospitals, practices and other organizations don’t have a reliable tracking system to identify the source of new patients and to measure the effectiveness of their marketing, advertising, promotion or referral efforts. Regardless of the size of the business, the program or any of the strategic or tactical parts – if you don’t track you just don’t know what’s working. Do you have a tracking system? Is it working? Is it reliable and accurate? It’s impossible to manage the plan or calculate your ROI without this part of the equation.

…plus, a timely tip…
Don’t let the Treatment Plan get ahead of the Diagnosis

In our consulting work with hospitals and other healthcare organizations around the nation, someone often calls to say they “need a flyer” or “have to have a newspaper ad” or whatever else they think is right and/or an immediate marketing tool for their business.

Imagine if a patient presented himself with a request for a specific medication before your medical staff had any history, exam, tests or a dozen other medical considerations.

The same principle applies in successful marketing programs regardless of the profession, marketplace, audience, etc. Don’t jump ahead. Invest the time to ask these questions of yourself, and get a clear and unbiased perspective on where you are and what you need to do to achieve your business development goals.

Call us if you need help finding these answers

Healthcare Success Strategies can guide your marketing as we have done for thousands of others around the nation, providing ethical, creative and evidence-based marketing strategies. All professions are competitive and diverse, and we know how to provide the experienced answers you need.

Success in healthcare marketing requires the ability to recognize, identify, plan and capitalize proactively on opportunities as they present themselves. This process requires a common group vision and common goals, effective planning, skillful execution, consistency and frequency in communication strategies, as well as a process of measuring, quantifying and evaluating marketing performance so that real-time adjustments can be made to increase the performance and profitability of the marketing efforts.

We understand what works and what doesn’t work in healthcare marketing and advertising. We know how to effectively communicate your value to your various audiences in ways that help them appreciate and utilize all that you have to offer. These audience groups include patients, prospective patients, referring physicians, self-referral patients, health insurance plans and many others.

In marketing…
first, do no harm.
And second, know yourself.
And third…
Call us today at
(800) 656-0907 and
we’ll help get all your questions answered.