

Charlotte Business Journal - July 20, 2009
</charlotte/stories/2009/07/20/focus4.html>

CHARLOTTE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Friday, July 17, 2009

Recession an opportunity for providers

Charlotte Business Journal - by [Anthony Cirillo](#) Guest columnist

Are you tired of hearing about the importance of marketing in a recession? I know I am. Yes, we all know the story. People are scared, so they are delaying elective procedures and avoiding out-of-pocket costs. So hospitals suffer in the near term. Likewise for health-related organizations such as continuing-care communities and assisted-living facilities — consumers are looking for care alternatives that will delay their need to spend.

So do care providers stop marketing in this economy? Of course not. Do you market in a different way? Yes.

While the word “buy” has a different connotation in health care, it still applies. Just because consumers aren’t buying health care now doesn’t mean they won’t return. Health care has always been a delayed purchase. So a delay is a perfect time to establish relationships and build what marketers call tipping points for choice.

How do you do that? Well, one thing is certain — don’t focus on you; focus on them. Here’s how:

•**Use data to provide value.** Health care sits on a wealth of data. Health-care marketers unfortunately do not or choose not to collect it. It’s not just about asking people about their health issues. It’s about learning consumers’ interests over time.

Harvey MacKay has something called the MacKay 66. This is a group of 66 questions his sales staff uses to find out more about prospects, all with the goal of forming relationships. Relationships lead to sales.

One of the obvious consumer interests is the concern over money, about being able to retire and other financial worries. So be smart. Sponsor and host smart-money lectures at your facility. Provide value where it is needed, even if it is not directly or currently related to your product or service.

•**Bring communities of people together.** Think of Harley-Davidson and its road rally. Saturn Corp. and its picnics. What do they accomplish? They bring communities of people together, and that has a halo effect on their brands.

Adopt causes strategically and bring people together around them. Offer your space for town-hall meetings, job fairs, anything that shows you understand their priorities. Connect people and move out of the way. Reap the benefits later.

•**Educate.** Many people are eager to land health-care jobs. Why not feed your own pipeline by educating people about the real needs in health-care facilities? Give them a primer so they can choose the right option for their retooled careers.

•**Provide influencers with key information.** Now is the time to plan and refocus. How is your institution becoming a voice for health-care reform? How do you demonstrate that in your daily operations? How are you preparing for the future? What green initiatives are you pursuing? In short, what important works are you doing that will provide future value?

Tell people about it. But not everyone — at least not right away. Provide influential people the information first and let them buzz about it. Their word of mouth is far more valuable than any press release or advertisement.

•**Refine the experience.** You are not out of business or going out of business. It may be slow, but you still have customers. And how they experience the health-care system will affect your brand and market share. Now is the time to examine and refine the health-care experience so it matches the clinical expertise you market.

Yes, this marketing stuff is not rocket science. But it does require some discipline, and it requires leaving your ego at the door. Marketing is more than advertising. Yet for many health-care institutions, advertising is all they got. It is tangible. It feels good. It supposedly shows they are doing something. But in the end, it’s all the intangibles that add up to solid marketing. It starts with the data and ends with the experience.

Anthony Cirillo is president of Fast Forward Strategic Planning and Marketing Consulting in Huntersville and can be reached at cirillo@4wardfast.com.

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.