

Mission, Vision and Mastercard What's priceless, and what's not, in hospital marketing.

You've seen the Mastercard commercials. A father takes his son to the baseball game or his daughter and her friends to the pop concert. Every aspect of the outing has a cost, except the experience, which is priceless. It's classic branding, infusing a piece of plastic with a friendly, human dimension. We not only warm to Mastercard, but are able to distinguish it from Visa, Discover and American Express. This piece of plastic, an absolute parity product, enjoys a distinct position in our mental catalog of credit cards.

Perhaps you've seen another commercial in which the wife turns to her husband in bed, quietly lamenting that he doesn't talk to her the way he used to. He mumbles a defense, she persists, he turns away, and she persists. Finally he turns to her, the silence builds, and in a perfect Donald Duck pucker, he says, "I wove you. I wove you verwy verwy much" It's a wonderful message from Disney. And it's delivered in excellent Donald Duck-ese.

This is branding at its best. We embrace the brand and forget that Mastercard, like Visa, is responsible for a huge debt burden on society. We forget that Disney is no longer a sacred childhood memory but an entertainment monolith which owns ABC. For a brief moment we're touched by charming, personal, relevant stories. These are messages that revolve around our lives.

Chances are your hospital promotes itself with a message that promises care and credentials. If your advertising bears any resemblance to last year's compilation of print and TV, we might see physicians telling us how much they care. Particularly cardiologists. We also see lots of happy patients, testimonials, surgical suites, MRIs and cath labs.

Odd. Consumers seem to hate the threat of a visit to any hospital and cringe at the prospect of invasive surgery. Why then do so many hospital spots linger in hospital corridors and surgical suites? Why do hospitals remain focused on their credentials, involving the consumer only in testimonials? Why is healthcare advertising so consistently lackluster, especially those ads that are trying to appeal to women, the primary healthcare decision maker for families today?

In the face of this, advertisers cannot expect women to devote time to long copy, boring messages, threatening topics or remote issues. Yet healthcare marketing presents just this.

Turn to your audience. Quickly.

Women today face lives of unrelenting stress and daily pressure. They've retained all traditional domestic responsibilities while adding careers, money worries, car-pooling pressures, expanding kid and school obligations, as well as caregiver duties for parents, siblings, children and spouses.

After countless focus groups and phone surveys in markets across the country we have ample proof that healthcare is, at best, a low-interest category. When a hospital ad is detected on our woman's radar screen, she will turn away from it, just as we turn away from the person with the clipboard, wanting to ask us questions at the mall.

So what is a healthcare marketer to do? Follow the lead of Mastercard and Disney. Listen very closely to the needs and interests of the women in your community. Heed the advice of Faith Popcorn:

"Women want a brand to speak to their heads and their hearts.

To understand them. To recognize their needs, values, standards, and dreams."

--Faith Popcorn, EVEolution

The wisdom of Saturn. (Or why an economy car from Tennessee can generate greater devotion than the hospital that delivered the same woman's baby.)

When GM decided to launch a new brand in the '80s they must have listened carefully to the 50% of the car buying public that had been overlooked for generations...women. Women (and men), it seems, share an intense dislike of car dealerships and car salesmen. Saturn, in the launch of their car, wisely focused on the sales process and subordinated the car.

There's a charming Saturn commercial in which a woman goes to pick up her new car and asks that they put a child safety seat in the back. When her husband accompanies her to the dealer, he looks in the back, discovers the seat, discovers his wife is pregnant, then slowly, lovingly, fixes his gaze on his expecting partner. It's a tear-jerker (he's a hunk, she's adorably real).

Of course Saturn doesn't deliver babies. You do. Saturn's just an economy car from Tennessee. Why are they entitled to this moving moment? Why haven't you capitalized on the incredible emotions like this that play out in your halls everyday? (Someone recently described a "best" friend as the person you sit with while waiting for lab reports.)

What Saturn manages so well, what Mastercard champions, and what hospitals must learn to do, is shift attention from themselves and onto the consumer.

Don't ever ask a consumer what they want in a hospital. (They don't want a hospital.)

Early in every positioning effort we conduct focus groups. The groups serve two roles. First they provide invaluable feedback to marketing concepts, leading us to a relevant position. But just as importantly, they illustrate to hospital management and medical staff how little interest there is in local healthcare.

This comes as a shock to most clients who assume the community wants and needs to hear about investments in technology, JCAHO awards, physician commitment and compassionate caring. But after listening to women in markets as diverse as Des Moines and Detroit, Oahu and Orlando, it's clear few of these messages have any currency or interest.

So let's say you assemble focus groups, with users and non-users, to learn what you can about prevailing opinions in your marketplace about healthcare providers. Please don't ask what they want in a hospital. Remember, this is an avoidance issue. Imagine someone stopping you on the street and asking what you want in a diarrhea remedy or catastrophic accident insurance or towing service. You could manufacture a response, but with no immediate interest in the topic, the response would be contrived.

Instead, take a page from milk and let your audience lead you to a message platform.

Got Milk? Lessons from a declining category.

Milk, as a beverage, had fallen in consumption for years. Technically a semi-viscous fatty substance, milk had been promoted as a nutritious part of a balanced diet for generations. Apparently, our sensitivity to saturated fat made milk a less popular option.

In the early '90s, an advertising agency on the west coast took a fresh look at the product. They put together focus groups with heavy consumers of milk. But instead of asking participants what they liked or didn't like about milk, they asked heavy users to give up milk. The agency paid the group participants to quit drinking milk for three weeks, giving them a journal to record their responses. At the end of the 21 days they were paid again to share their discoveries

The groups returned with a revelation. Heavy milk drinkers didn't miss milk, they missed Oreos, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, brownies, chocolate chip cookies, Twinkies, Hostess Cup Cakes, Fruit Loops and Raisin Bran. Milk, they discovered, was a complement to life's indulgences. It played a supporting role. Show a milk drinker a picture of milk and you get minimal response. Show him a stack of chocolate chip cookies and milk becomes irresistible.

We need to explore healthcare with the same detached naivete. Medicine plays a supporting role for most of us. It empowers us to pursue life at various levels and repairs us when we are broken. It is not a daily preoccupation, nor is it a sacred topic--until we get older.

Finding the Point of Relevance. (How to get beyond high-touch and high-tech.)

Let's get back to your hospital. Chances are you bring life into the world. You save lives in your ED. You may open hearts, eradicate cancers or replace joints. You may restore vision and mobility. Perhaps you work wonders with children. In most cases, you work miracles, daily. Yet you get little or no credit for it.

Meanwhile, your audience, primarily female, is distracted by more deserving brand images like JC Penney or Nike or Martha Stewart or Saturn. Yes, more deserving brands. These brands accommodate her needs and traditionally place her - the woman you're both trying to reach - first in the dialogue. As we saw in the Saturn commercial, they offer something emotionally rewarding, entertaining, often amusing.

What milk, Saturn, Mastercard and Disney give us is a point of relevance. At this point, our life and their product intersect. This, we believe, is the obligation of healthcare marketing. We must put our audience first, listen closely to local issues and determine where hospital competencies intersect with market needs. This intersection is the point of relevance.

To find your point of relevance you must enter focus groups with theories to be tested, you can't expect consumers to articulate needs and opportunities. Think about Starbucks...when did consumers say, collectively..."we're tired of paying \$.50 for a cup of coffee, we want to pay \$3.00"? What mom said, five years ago, "I want a huge, \$40,000+, four wheel drive to get to the store and back"? What airline passenger asked for all creature comforts to be stripped away, and to be treated like cattle (Southwest)?

Imagine what position your hospital could occupy in the minds of your audience. What relevance could you play in their lives? Start by thinking in terms of the categories consumers have already created for other goods.

Perhaps you'd be more relevant as a hospital for the family (re: Disney), for the thinking consumer (re: Volvo), for the active consumer (re: Nike), for women (re: Secret, Saturn), as user-friendly (re: Apple), as more accommodating (re: Marriott, Ritz Carlton), as traditionalists (re: Hallmark, Kodak, Smuckers), or as a solution to the problems existing in other hospitals (re: Sprint PCS).

Begin your search for relevance assuming that consumers already know you provide healthcare, that quality and care are expected, that doctors, nurses and patients frequent your halls. Remember, most of your audience won't have immediate need of your services. Above all, credit your audience with being the sophisticated consumers of media that they are. Consumers are very quick to actively or passively turn off ads. You must fly under their radar and sustain interest if you hope to communicate anything.

Before going into research, look at your core competencies and determine if your product lines would support a position as family-friendly or women-friendly, or as more accommodating. Take these ideas into your groups, in either written concept or visual form, and explore the appeal. Would being "family-friendly" resonate with moms or diminish your credentials? Would being the "Volvo" of healthcare providers make you more capable, but less caring?

Remember the milk story. Consumers already knew what role milk played. It took the dairy industry 40 years to ask the right questions and hear it for the first time. Your goal is to open the door for a discussion that gets beyond "high-tech" and "high-touch". Leave quality and care out of the discussion, never ask a consumer what she or he wants in a hospital, and know that "ER," "Scrubs," "General Hospital," "Chicago Hope," "St. Elsewhere" and "Marcus Welby" have already set standards for in-hospital entertainment and drama that you can't match.

Marketing in a non-marketing environment.

Hospitals are not traditional marketing organizations. Marketing departments in hospitals have yet to earn the clout they command in package goods, autos, fast foods or personal care industries. In marketing organizations, the consumer is king. In hospitals, physicians rule, program and service line directors battle for budget dollars, newsletters command an obscene share of marketing resources, and nobody messes with cardiology.

Selling your hospital on the need for consumer-focused marketing begins with common support for a brand position. This often requires some education among physicians and management and is bigger in scope than this article. But the orientation can begin at any time with an entertaining demonstration of the differences between national brand advertising and conventional hospital marketing. You can order the yearbook of Annual Healthcare Advertising Awards at: Healthcare Marketing Report, P.O. Box 76002, Atlanta, GA 30358. Unfortunately, it illustrates all of the shortcomings we've chronicled.

Good advertising is entertaining, stimulating and easily recalled. Ask your group of management and physicians to share their favorite commercials or print ads. You'll find humor, whimsy, originality and consumer-focus common in most of what's shared. Then show them your current campaign. Remind them that even the best-looking physicians can't compensate for the weaknesses of self-indulgent marketing. Pull management and physicians into focus groups for them to witness responses firsthand. If they can't make it to the groups, videotape and edit the sessions to demonstrate key points. Let them hear what the public thinks of their services, and where it ranks in daily priorities. Use focus groups to demonstrate how little differentiation there is between providers.

Mission, Vision and MasterCard. (Putting your audience first and second, your mission and vision statement third.)

Below is a mission statement lifted off the Internet. Call me reckless, but it seems to address the obligations of all hospitals and the expectations of all patients. Don't we all expect compassion and sensitivity? Would we tolerate anything less than excellence in healthcare?

“We are dedicated to providing compassionate, sensitive care to our patients and their family and to achieving excellence in health care through our on-going commitment to education and research.”

Your mission statement does not belong in your advertising. Consumers need a simple way of understanding how you compare to other healthcare providers and what you can do for them. Your beliefs will not answer their needs.

Remember, a conventional approach to brand positioning will only reinforce conventional images of your institution. There will be no differentiation between you and your competitors. Your capable physicians, your incredible nursing staff, your significant investments in technology will go unnoticed if your brand image doesn't rise above the competition and the category. To come across as a smart, capable, progressive hospital, you must project a comparable image.

Above all, be bold. Humor and entertainment must find their way into hospital advertising. If ever a category called for humor and relief, it's medicine. If ever a time called for entertainment and escape, it's now. Notice how Southwest Airlines shattered the sober traditions of the airline industry by taking themselves less seriously and injecting humor into operations as well as marketing. Southwestern Bell, IBM, Sprint PCS, Volkswagen, Mercedes, Target, and H&R Block have all taken typically sober traditions and introduced whimsy and levity.

Let's salute milk, Saturn and Mastercard. Let's turn the spotlight on the consumer, away from ourselves. There's something priceless about your hospital, so give it a chance to shine.