

What's wrong with radiology marketing? (and what you can do about it)



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If you're a radiologist, a center/hospital administrator, or a marketing professional charged with selling radiology services, you know something is wrong.

Perhaps you haven't been able to put your finger on exactly what it is. Maybe you have your own theories as to why it is so difficult to access referring physician offices, differentiate your center or practice, and build new referral volume.

The following analysis, observations and recommendations stem from more than 20 years of marketing radiology services and imaging centers. We have identified five key problem areas where radiology services marketing is deficient... areas which must be addressed if you are to have success in growing patient volume and sustaining your practice for the long term.

PROBLEM #1: YOU'VE COMMODITIZED YOUR BUSINESS

“Commoditization has occurred because by outsourcing we have taught hospitals that any study can be ready by anybody at any time. If we are all alike we become a commodity and commodities are traded on price.” said Lawrence Muroff, MD, of Imaging Consultants Inc. at the 2012 annual meeting of the AHRA. “Groups are being replaced because hospitals think one group of radiologists is no different from another.”

The same holds true for independent imaging centers and the radiologists who work for them. According to Gary M. Glazer, MD and Julie A. Ruiz-Wibbelsmann, PhD of Stanford University, the spread of independent imaging centers, “promulgated by the fee-for-service reimbursement system creates a disincentive for direct interaction between radiologists and patients becoming the accepted standard of practice.”

“Many of the factors that led to the commoditization of pathology are also operating in radiology,” say Glazer and Ruiz-Wibbelsmann. “And while radiologists’ efforts to eliminate variations in image acquisition and interpretation have improved quality, the by-product has been a service that is increasingly distinguishable by price alone.”

Lack of patient and referring physician interaction... poor representation and/or ineffectiveness in government healthcare lobbying... and the fact that half of the public is unaware of whether radiologists are physicians or technicians—which proves the failure of the industry to adequately explain the radiologist’s expertise, training, skill and overall role in healthcare. These are the factors that have commoditized radiology, and the reasons why you must now take it upon yourself to change these perceptions and reverse the trend.

DO YOU CHOOSE A LAWYER BECAUSE THEY SPECIALIZE IN THE LAW? OR DO YOU CHOOSE A LAWYER BASED ON THEIR PARTICULAR SKILLS AND ABILITIES TO SOLVE A SERIOUS PROBLEM?

The solution: Educate patients as to the role of the radiologist and the training required to develop the expertise required to read and interpret diagnostic imaging, or perform interventional procedures. This doesn’t need to be expensive... you can do it right in your own waiting room.

Next, begin to differentiate your practice based on your team’s skill set. Perhaps you have a more extensive breast imaging team. Or a neurointerventional radiology specialty. Or maybe your team has more combined years of experience than that of other centers or groups. Either way, find out what makes your radiologists special and then promote it.

Never assume your market knows the full extent of what you do. And instead of sitting in a dark room all day looking at images, have your radiology staff interact with and communicate to your patients, as well as their doctors.

PROBLEM #2: MARKETING IS/WAS NEVER GIVEN PRIORITY

Ask five radiology professionals “What is marketing?” and you’ll get five different answers. The most common answer, we have found, is that marketing relates to the individual employed by the center who visits the doctors, or the group in the hospital that creates the advertisements.

If you don’t know what marketing is, you certainly can’t be any good at it.

According to the American Marketing Association, marketing is “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners and society at large.” According to Merriam-Webster, marketing is “an aggregate of functions involved in moving goods from producer to consumer” and the “process or technique of promoting, selling and distributing a product or service.”

Marketing is not a person. It is not a department. It is a process that must permeate all aspects of a radiology operation. Until all individuals and departments recognize the vital role that marketing plays in a successful business...until it is given priority and funding and attention... its many benefits will be virtually non-existent.

Over the years, some radiologists I met with admitted they were actually afraid to market their practice. Their concern? Professional jealousy from referring physicians, who might view such ‘extravagances’ with disdain and contempt. Or that it might “diminish the value” of their profession.

Yet, ironically, this is exactly what has occurred without marketing!

The solution: Make it a point to understand the various facets of marketing and elevate your marketing program to a level of high importance within your organization. Develop and maintain an ongoing marketing communications program to support your physician liaisons and help to preserve your current physician and patient relationships.

I am often asked, “How much should I invest in marketing?” The answer is different for every practice. However, it is not some random assigned percentage, as you might have seen in a marketing article somewhere in a radiology journal. Your budget will be that which you need to invest to stay competitive and provide a healthy ROI.

DID YOU KNOW THAT THE AVERAGE AMERICAN BUSINESS INVESTS NEARLY 11% OF ITS ANNUAL GROSS IN MARKETING? AND THAT SOME BUSINESSES PROFITABLY INVEST AS MUCH AS 50%?

PROBLEM #3: THE WRONG PEOPLE ARE HANDLING YOUR MARKETING

Marketing, and its highly important subset, Marketing Communications are priorities to successful businesses. They are successfully used by medical professionals throughout the United States to explain services, differentiate practices and build customer loyalty.

"We've tried advertising," said a radiologist client of mine once. "And it didn't work."

It never dawned on this individual that it might be *his* advertising that didn't work. Task a bartender with reading a mammogram. When the incorrect conclusion is reached, was it the fault of the diagnostic image or the abilities of the person interpreting the exam? The same holds true for marketing. A medical degree from an Ivy League University does not a marketing expert make. Therefore, unless marketing experts were used to create that center's advertising, that physician cannot possibly know that "advertising doesn't work."

Marketing communications is much more than advertising. It encompasses all materials and messages put out by your organization that are seen and/or read by your target audiences, primarily physicians and patients. It includes the patient brochures and referral forms you supply to referring physicians. Your logo and center signage. Your web site. In-office displays and posters. Even the reports you send to doctors and the bills that are received by patients. Do these all deliver a clear and concise message that give customers a reason to remain loyal to you? Or do they simply list the services you offer? Remember the earlier discussion on the commoditization of the industry?

CHECK YOUR BIASES. A SKILLED MARKETER NEVER DISMISSES A VIABLE MARKETING MEDIUM WITH THE WORDS, "IT DOESN'T WORK."

More importantly, who within your organization is managing your marketing? Is it a physician? A technologist? An administrator? A sales rep? If you want marketing to work, the person handling your marketing should be a radiology marketing expert. Another important point... don't assume that a salesperson is a marketing expert... in my experience, most of them aren't.

In fact, sadly, most radiology sales reps pounding the pavement today couldn't even be considered experts in medical imaging, and are incapable of holding their own in a conversation with a potential referring physician. Is it any wonder why they are failing?

The solution: Find qualified people and make them your marketing team. Don't let them be dominated and/or managed by your physician reps either... they should be independent of them but highly supportive and responsive to their needs.

Most importantly, set aside your personal biases when it comes to marketing. Most advertising and direct marketing mediums do work if the messaging and timing are sound.

PROBLEM #4: YOU HAVEN'T PROVIDED YOUR PHYSICIAN REPS WITH ADEQUATE SUPPORT

What are your center's physician reps doing to better gain access to referring physicians and their staffs? Are they "dropping in" unannounced, carrying donuts or pens or squishy balls?

If the "tools" used by your reps are donuts, pens or squishy balls with your logo on them, what is the professional impression these individuals will leave on the people they meet?

What's more, these are the same exact tactics that have been used by other reps in other fields of medicine, vying for the attention of the same individuals at that physician's office. Is it any wonder why now more than half of all physician practices have declared themselves rep inaccessible?

Do your reps a favor. Elevate their status both within your organization and among the professionals they meet. Spend the time to make them experts in all areas of diagnostic imaging and interventional procedures. Back them with educational tools and compelling content to use with referrers. And give them case studies that demonstrate your center's core competencies and expertise, its unique technological attributes and key competitive differentiators.

SUPPORT YOUR PHYSICIAN REPS WITH TOOLS THAT DIFFERENTIATE YOUR PRACTICE AND DEMONSTRATE EXPERTISE. REPLACE DONUTS AND SQUISHY BALLS WITH CASE STUDIES, HELPFUL ORDERING GUIDES AND PERSONAL VISITS ACCOMPANIED BY MEMBERS OF THE RADIOLOGY TEAM.

The solution: Stop feeding the stomachs of your market and start feeding their brains. Slash the lunch budget and instead invest in case studies that pique professional interest of your referring docs and demonstrate your expertise.

A 2014 study published in the *American Journal of Neuroradiology* showed that the participation of a radiologist during visits to referring physician offices improved referring volume by a factor of 2.5 over visits by the rep alone. Why not use your most valuable assets—your radiology team—in your sales and marketing?

PROBLEM #5: YOU'VE BECOME TOO DEPENDENT ON THE REFERRING PHYSICIAN

Many of you reading this will disagree with this statement. “How could you say that!” you may be asking. “You can’t have a radiology practice without referring physicians!”

Actually, you can. There are radiology practices throughout the county targeting patients directly with impressive results.

“But so many of the tests we offer require a physician referral! And so do the follow-up exams!”

You’re right, of course. But please recall the “commoditization” discussion earlier in this paper. That very problem can now be used to your advantage.

A patient who wants to visit a particular imaging center can request as much from their physician. The physician, not perceiving any real difference among the various radiology practices in town, will typically go along with the wishes of their patient. While they may prefer another center for their referrals, they will very rarely argue with their patient over their imaging provider.

Some physician specialists have reported that as many as 50% of their patients are requesting referral to a specific imaging center.

This patient choice dynamic is not typically noticed or tracked by the radiology provider. If anyone was looking, they might notice that a new physician has referred a patient. The physician liaison may take credit for it, since the order came from a doctor whose office was visited in the past few months. Or the referral might come from a doctor who has referred to you in the past but may not have in recent years. Unless you ask the patient if they requested your center, you will probably never know this amazing feat has happened.

The solution: Engage in direct-to-patient marketing.

You will find that, over time, a surprisingly high number of your patients will come from these efforts. And you will be able to tie new referring physicians to your direct-to-patient marketing.

Many diagnostic imaging and screening tests are required by the patient in perpetuity. Consider the future value of the patient you attract today and what they will mean to your bottom line over the next 10 years.

If you’re offering a test or treatment that isn’t offered by your competitors, you can use consumer marketing to cause a prospective patient to engage in a dialog with his or her physician—about your service. You can provide that patient with educational tools they can share with their physician. And you can offer to speak directly to their physician to fully address any questions or concerns that they have.

Pharmaceutical companies understand how critical patient marketing is to the overall mix. You don’t have to have their budget—just their desire to reach out to the ultimate consumer of your services and to convince them of your worth. In fact, there are a number of new and effective digital marketing techniques that are far less expensive than mass media.

DIRECT-TO-PATIENT MARKETING NOT ONLY ATTRACTS NEW PATIENTS TO YOUR CENTER, IT HELPS TO EARN NEW REFERRING PHYSICIANS AS WELL.

So... what is your opportunity when a physician—aligned with another imaging center or hospital—agrees to refer a single patient to your center? Well, you now have the opportunity to make that physician aligned with YOUR practice, which can lead to many, many future referrals. In addition to doing what you do best—providing quality diagnostic exams and clear, expert interpretations in a timely manner—your radiologist can now reach out to that physician personally, and take the opportunity to consult with them regarding that particular patient, when appropriate. Your center will create a highly positive experience for both patient and referring physician, and when the timing is right, you will have the opportunity to find out what's wrong with that doctor's current relationship with his preferred provider and learn ways to earn more of his referrals.

CONCLUSION

The solutions offered here are not revolutionary. They are an inherent part of the country's most successful businesses, yet they have somehow eluded the majority of radiology business professionals. Understandably, you've been focused on improving efficiencies, coding accuracy, more timely collections and in some cases, better customer service. But you've neglected many important areas of marketing, and you may be suffering now because of it.

The good news is there is no "single" correct way to market your center or practice. There are many different techniques and combinations of tactics that work. But remember, you are a professional services organization. You are in the company of lawyers, CPAs, consultants and other physician practices. To be effective, you must demonstrate your professional expertise and achieve preference for your services, not just create awareness. A giant, inflatable gorilla may work for a car dealer, but such approaches will have an adverse effect for you.

At the same time, an advertisement or brochure that reads "diagnostic imaging services" and lists all the modalities you offer in no way creates preference for your center or practice. You don't patronize a new, high-end restaurant because they told you they offer "food." Nor do you book a particular hotel because their advertisement simply told you they have "rooms."

The marketing expertise you need can be hired internally or outsourced to a specialist. The more you look into the role of marketing, and the more you educate yourself on how businesses use marketing effectively, the more you will see just how far behind the curve the radiology industry remains. Fortunately, you still have the opportunity to embrace marketing to outmaneuver the competition and realize its full benefits for your practice.