

MARKETING SAVVY:

Think, Plan, and Do—A Marketer's Guide to Managing Trends

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Sometimes, it's hard to balance the marketer's role in today's environment. Our customers, both internal and external, are more demanding; time is short, and we're running fast just to keep up. However, an exciting part of being a marketer is finding strategies to meet these challenges. In this fast-paced environment, let's take a moment to pause, think, plan, and do.

Pause

Healthcare costs have sky rocketed for a variety of reasons, but hospitals continue to bear the brunt of the blame. Employers and insurers are seeking ways to address this through consumer-directed health plans, limited (or no) benefits, flexible benefit plans, increased employee contributions, and wellness and disease management programs.

Additionally, customers expect more and have become more sophisticated in their healthcare choices. We must critically examine how our services measure up against other services they can buy.

Here's a quick checklist to get started:

- Are your services easily explained and accessed?
- Do employers know their assigned staff members and how to reach them?
- Do you communicate with them every step of the way?
- If employers have a need or complaint, do they care enough to tell you?
- Do you exceed their expectations and demonstrate a palpable value? Remember, you're being compared to Nordstrom, Ritz Carlton, and UPS — not necessarily to other hospitals or clinics.
- Do you follow up after services are provided?

Your goal is to configure your services around the customer's expectations and experiences. Walk in your customer's shoes — find out what your employers experience in the sales relationship and what employees experience as a patient.

Think and Analyze

Marketing opportunities are out there, but only if you're poised and ready for action. Develop a critical thinking SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threats) analysis, making sure you seek input from your team and Leadership. Start by asking yourself these questions:

- If you want to grow the business, where and how would you do that? If you have to take market share from a competitor, what will ensure this happens?
- Have you seen your business change or shift?
- Are your customers asking for things you can't provide or simply haven't recognized?
- If you've lost business, why? What could you have done to retain that business?
- Are there services you should be buying or developing that could allow you to capture more business?

- Do you have a small client base where you could “test” new program offerings regarding packaging, marketing, pricing, and delivery?
- Can you track and measure the impact of successful new programs? Can you provide this information in a manner that helps your clients negotiate better rates or hold down costs in the future?

Plan and Design

Planning is critical to your success. If you can’t visualize where you want to be, it’s difficult to make it happen. Planning is well worth the effort because it forces you and your staff to think critically and form strategies. Start building your sales and marketing plan by answering these key questions:

- What is your plan to keep the business you cannot afford to lose? What do you need to do with staffing, programs, customer service, and communication to ensure that you exceed expectations, retain patient volume and revenues, and foster program stability?
- How do you plan to grow business from the current client base? Which clients and services should be your focus? How do you “educate, market, and sell” new or add-on services to these clients?
- Can you exploit vulnerabilities in your competitors? Can you take advantage of new regulations to become “the expert” in your market?
- Do you have a marketing communications plan that uses all possible methods to talk with your customers? For example, articles in business journals, television or radio interviews with your physicians, partnering with occupational health or urgent care services for 24/7 health information and triaging, and an employee referral program to generate new leads for your sales efforts.

Develop a comprehensive sales and marketing plan, and clearly state the tactics you will follow to reach your goals. Include your approach, methods, frequency, and desired results. This attention to detail helps you not only implement well-analyzed strategies, but also measure and prove your success.

Do

To prove your success, you’ll need to have an implementation plan (see below) that identifies focus, assignment, and measurement indicators. In most cases, the challenge lies not in a shortage of ideas but in getting the job done. Start with goals that can be quickly attained to establish a few key successes. Then build on these to incorporate more difficult and longer-term strategies.

Communicate Your Value

While thinking, planning, and doing are important to your day-to-day job, you won’t have a job if you don’t consistently communicate with Leadership. Don’t overlook Leadership’s opinion of your program — it’s crucial to your viability. Discuss your challenges and successes with them. Proactively engage them in your analysis and understanding of your target customer and your short- and long-term goals.

Conclusion

While we're all operating on the endless treadmill of things-to-do, we can gain tremendous leverage and success by taking the time to periodically pause, analyze, think, and do. Sometimes that breath of fresh air gives us the perspective to re-energize, re-focus, and re-commit to goals that make our programs strong and sustainable.

Sample implementation plan:
Use this table to start your own plan

Focus	Assignment	Measurement	Comment
Retention	Service Team	Satisfaction and retention of X% of current business	Ongoing to targeted customer base
New Business	Sales	Increase of X% in key service areas	Ongoing to targeted prospect base
New Product	Sales & Clinical Team	Feedback from pilot program marketing launch and initial sales figures	Introduce one new product in 2006



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