

Marketing Savvy: Proving the Worth of Your Program

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Imagine that your Occupational Health Program has been in existence for more than ten years. The program has built an excellent reputation in the community, you've moved three times in the past ten years to accommodate growth, and you've added physicians and staff to accommodate volume. While your program appears strong, a problem is lurking...you know it, but can't seem to get your administration to listen.

The problem is that the program is barely covering its direct expenses. At the same time, no one will acknowledge the immense amounts of "spin off" revenue being generated by your program. Your CFO considers it "soft" money. Viable programs should be able to cover both their direct and indirect costs in order to remain in favor with the organization. Sounding familiar? Even new programs are vulnerable to this situation. What should you do? You must make certain that your program is operating efficiently, while receiving the recognition for the revenue that it indirectly generates to your parent organization. Put your program on the map with the following tips and strategies.

Get Out the Microscope

As we concentrate on day-to-day program management, we sometimes lose sight of our program's ability to demonstrate value to our parent organization. Your program should have regularly scheduled assessments. At a minimum, there are certain key areas that should be examined every year.

Stay Connected—Externally

In healthcare, we're all too ready to assume we know the needs and wants of our customers. Be cautious of marketplace arrogance and create regular opportunities to have an in-depth dialogue with your customers. Listen and learn from them and be responsive to their ideas.

There are several great ways to obtain feedback, such as using an Employer Advisory Board, regular patient and employer surveys, and open forums to solicit input. Use your sales team to continuously update the customer profiles, especially your "A" or top accounts. And don't forget to keep your customers updated on new programs or processes introduced in response to their suggestions.

It's also important to update your knowledge of the marketplace and its impact upon your customers. Do not assume you know the answers. Develop a process for a true evaluation of what is happening in the economic environment and its potential impact upon your program, coupled with input from current and potential customers. If you've been doing customer satisfaction and patient exit surveys, you should incorporate a comprehensive market potential and financial analysis, as well as focus groups, every two to three years. Use your information gathering not just to seek out confirmation of the current program offerings, but also to determine what you should be thinking about in the next three years.

Stay Connected—Internally

Develop a program assessment checklist (see sidebar below) for reviewing all aspects of your

occupational health program, including marketing, sales, operations, clinical and product capabilities, your staffing model, and each staff member's performance. Are you really running your program in a way that maximizes your program and its clinical offerings while maximizing customer and organizational benefit?

If you are conducting this assessment without outside assistance, it's especially helpful to develop a task force and assign team members who can lend objectivity to their assigned areas of review. You should also consider involving key leaders from other parts of your organization in this team. Is there a department that runs exceptionally well that you would like to benchmark? Involve its manager for key insights into how to improve your program. Such involvement gives you the opportunity to create, develop, or strengthen an internal champion for your program.

Making a Difference

Once the internal and external information has been gathered and assessed, you will have a much clearer picture of your program. What you do with that information will make or break your program in the long term. A program not only has to be sound, it must also be positioned for long-term sustainability. Use your program assessment as a way to demonstrate your program's value and engage your senior leadership team in your vision.

Here are some of the bigger questions that you should be asking beyond day-to-day operations. Do you have champions for your program? If so, how engaged and knowledgeable are they? What are their expectations of your program? Do you and your staff truly understand them? Are they realistic or do you need to make them more so?

- Is your program at break-even levels including overhead? (With emphasis on the right things most programs can achieve these levels of performance.)
- Can you track and report the amount of revenue you contribute to the organization, indirect and direct?
- How well are you managing and planning for program expenses the cost of unit/service delivery, and future program growth funding needs?
- Do you have a strong database management system for operations (patient and clinical) and sales/marketing? Are you able to review and analyze the data in terms of trends, volumes, revenue, and strategic focus?
- Do you have a grounded view of your external marketplace balanced with your internal capabilities? Do you really know your competition?
- What are your plans for managing and keeping the business you have while also bringing new business into your program? How will that be staffed and managed?
- Is your staff trained to deliver quality services? Are they schooled in satisfaction, product knowledge, selling the strategy and exceeding customers' desires?

The importance of an operational champion cannot be minimized. It is the senior leader who will advocate for your program and its strategic value. It is that senior leader who will understand the direct link between occupational health and referral revenue to other services in the hospital and will share that information with other senior managers to validate your program. That champion will also see the strategic value of satisfied company employees who influence the healthcare decisions in their families.

Develop a Checklist

When engaging an internal team, develop a checklist of items to provide structure.

MARKETING

What materials seem to be used the most—when, for what purpose, and why?

Where do we need to have marketing materials, and for which type of customer?

How does our customer typically learn about us?

Have we reviewed updated models for marketing, such as web site, e-news, etc?

Is our marketing program effective? How do we know? Has market share increased? What other factors do we measure?

SALES

How current is our sales plan, and does it reflect the organization's strategic goals?

Are we focused on meeting customer needs while positioning the services that generate optimum return?

Who is our target audience for what types of business—and do we have a sales strategy to obtain that business?

Is our sales force in the field 60-75% of the time, or have they been consumed by other duties, like solving operational problems?

Do we have the right people selling? If so, do they have the training, tools and focus? If not, what is our plan to address that void?

Do we have a sales force that is knowledgeable and respected by our customers?

OPERATIONS

Do we have the right product mix and focus on product? If not, what is our plan?

Do we have the right staffing mix to deliver the products and to address peak schedules?

Do we have up-to-date policies, procedures, and forms, and have we trained staff and support departments on their use?

Have we assigned the right roles and responsibilities to staff, or do some adjustments need to be made?

Have we worked on our financials? Can we provide snapshots of our business that reflect a true analysis of volumes, revenue, product focus, staff to product/patient ratio, and our value to the organization's strategy?

Are we able to show our clients the value of our services through user-friendly reports on lost work time reduction? Reduction in injuries?

If your program is not operating at breakeven, you should at least be looking at how you can tighten your budget. Is staff duplicating work? Are you running parallel occupational health and employee health programs? (Combining them can save money.) Do you have the right staffing mix for the clients being served? Are you capturing all of the charges that you should be capturing through proper coding and other charge capture mechanisms? Looking at your program from this perspective will not only help you to manage the day-to-day operations better, but also position your program's long-term value to your organization and community.

Where to Begin?

From our team's many years in the business, we'd like to provide you with some ideas and recommendations for how to get started analyzing your program.

Assessment: Conduct the program assessment as outlined. Identify your opportunities to improve and begin to implement changes. Create checkpoints or measurements to ensure being on target and to allow for future fine-tuning of your changes.

New ideas: Challenge the old way of doing occupational health and workers' compensation services. Think in terms of customer input and ways that you can develop the products of the future.

Refocus on sales and service: Difficult economic times may have caused you to trim staff or cut marketing. Review your overall strategy and build a sales plan that identifies targeted companies. Prioritize your plan by focusing on products or relationships that will be profitable for you and ensure the continuity of long-term customer relationships as well.

Reporting: Build a mechanism endorsed by your senior leadership that tracks and credits indirect and direct revenue and volumes generated by your program. Then develop a report that demonstrates these results and provide it to leadership on a consistent basis.

Staffing: Make sure you have the right staff. Sometimes people get burned out or are promoted into positions that they just don't fit. Work from a blank slate and build a team that helps you to deliver the product and meet the current and future needs of the customer. Where do you have gaps, and what kind of person (skills and competencies) would fill the need?

Training: Don't assume your team is where it should be. Identify weak spots and engage in training—especially if you are developing a new product or service.

Communication: If internal or external communication is inconsistent or poor, what can you do to improve it? Do you have clearly defined roles and responsibilities in terms of customer communication? If not, build a plan, process and teach people their roles in maintaining the dialogue with a customer and each other.

External advisors: Build an employer advisory board. Engage board members to serve as your Alpha/Beta sites for new program offerings and to guide your program in enhancements or growth strategies. Meet with them 2-4 times a year, with focus group questions, product testing, and a discussion of their marketplace issues and economies. What is impacting upon their world affects your program, so understand their issues and work with them to build your role as their partner.

Why Should You Go to the Trouble?

While there isn't any glamour in conducting an assessment, the payoff to your program can be very rewarding. Consider these points:

- ❑ No one is better positioned than you, with your knowledge of the product offerings, regulations, and client needs, to address and build the "right" program.
- ❑ Better you discover your own weaknesses and develop corrective actions than having leadership point a finger and demand correction.
- ❑ Successful programs conduct regular assessments using objective teams for the evaluation. They also optimize the internal team to build strategic models to capture new market opportunities.

A program that is built upon customers' need and fully engages those customers is ultimately the most successful, and enjoys the greatest loyalty from its clients. A loyal client becomes your advocate and greatest referral source for future business. It's important to remember that your staff and employees are customers too, and if they feel engaged and fulfilled, so will your clients. When a systematic approach is taken to developing, maintaining, and growing your program, you can't help but be positioned for success within your organization. Everyone likes to be associated with successful programs. With the process described and the discipline to carry it out, your program can have fans for many years to come.



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