

Marketing Savvy: Reviving the Art of Communication How to Stay Connected to Your Customers

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There's no denying it—we've arrived at a place and time where e-mail substitutes for a conference call, we trade messages with (but never see) a co-worker, and customers visit a web site to read an organization's brochure. That's what most people call communication today.

Isn't it ironic that in a time when technology has created new, faster ways to send and receive messages, more often than not these messages are misinterpreted, ignored or missed?

Internally, we tell each other we're too busy. So we send a group e-mail or post a notice on the breakroom bulletin board. And then we take it for granted that everybody's seen it, read it, and taken action.

Externally, we make assumptions about what's best for our prospect or client, without really taking time to listen. Too often, we're already crafting the plan in our head before we actually know what the client wants.

Provider, Heal Thyself

We need to acknowledge our shortcomings before we can improve. Take a look at your organization's and your own personal communication style and be honest. Are you creating a culture where messages—sent and received—are valued?

What Leadership does is often copied by the staff. If those at the top value and demonstrate the importance of communication, staff will see the value of doing the same with their clients. Communication is really all about building relationships and creating connections of personal value that will endure the occasional misstep.

Making a Client Connection

Sales and marketing staffs have some of the finest opportunities to seek out and craft customer connections that will generate valuable, long-term business relationships. These opportunities may be with employers, business advisory panels and the chamber of commerce, through community and business educational opportunities, or by connecting clients with their peers.

Recognize that in today's information-laden world, external prospects and clients are armed with an abundance of information. This information overload demands that the salesperson stand out among the clutter. Here lies an opportunity to work with Leadership to craft a positioning strategy that enhances your personal connection with customers. This strategy should differentiate your message and offering. Include these steps in your communication sales strategy:

- Proactively plan your message and differentiated position for your services. Be able to apply these to the customer's personal and business needs.
- Identify the prospects and customers with whom you most want to do business.

- ❑ Ensure a sales approach and frequency that keeps you personally engaged with them: educating, informing, and working as their healthcare partner.
- ❑ Empower your internal team with service messages. Help them to understand the value of your customers and their patients. Engage them in the process of service and increased client retention with scripted responses that consistently demonstrate a value for the customer.

Preparing Your Sales Team

6 Tips for Making More Effective Connections

Make your point and keep your message simple. Too much information will only confuse the recipient.

Listen to what your customer is saying. Ask questions, get details. Use their words to reflect back that you heard what they said.

Communicate in person. Save electronic modes for long distance, time management purposes, documentation, or reinforcement/confirmation.

If you do use e-mail, remember that it can be saved and shared with others. So treat it like the old-fashioned letter: write it, review it, and make sure it says what you really mean. Make a personal follow-up by phone, voice mail, or a face-to-face visit.

Tailor your style to the recipient. Pay attention to visual and auditory clues. Is the recipient outgoing or quiet, the keeper of an organized workspace or one in disarray? These clues should impact the way you deliver information.

Practice scripting messages so you're comfortable delivering them. Role-play with a colleague to anticipate the answers or questions you'll receive.

Putting it All Together

Hold an integrated **staff meeting** monthly or quarterly for an opportunity to gather everybody in the same room to share information and discuss issues.

Publish an **internal newsletter** that updates personal and business information about the team.

If you're going to **acknowledge** a great employee, do it publicly—if they're comfortable. Find out how individuals like to be recognized.

If you're going to **criticize**, do it privately.

Communicate information about new processes in different ways. Not everyone receives messages in the same way. For standard situations, build "scripts" that guide and help people to know what to ask and say in various scenarios. This will help them prepare to handle the non-routine situation.

Give your sales team the tools and training they need to reinforce the service messages with their prospects and clients. Don't ignore these relationship-selling basics:

- ❑ Ask good questions. Build a base of questions that help you ascertain the customer's situation. What are their buying needs, what problems are they trying to solve, what outcome do they want?
- ❑ Actively listen. You can't learn if you don't hear. Work to heighten your listening capability and create personal ways to let the customer know you are listening. Restate what you learned, use their words, confirm you heard and understood what they said.
- ❑ Build a solution that addresses the information captured in your needs assessment. Make sure that your solution provides a motivation for working with you in addition to solving their stated business problems.
- ❑ Teach the team the "art" of asking for the business. The true test of communicating is the salesperson's ability to manage the tension at the time of asking for the customer's commitment. Some steps to discuss with your sales team:
 - ❑ Know what you want the customer to buy or do and be prepared to ask for the maximum, midpoint, and minimum.
 - ❑ Be able to ask for the close in action-oriented terms and have them commit and engage in working with you.
 - ❑ Talk about implementation and what your team or clinic will do to fulfill their agreement to work with you.
 - ❑ Find ways to confirm for them the wisdom of doing business with you.

Creating a Communication Culture

Our organizations typically excel at formal, meeting-oriented communication. The place where we need improvement is and ideas should be a priority for healthcare organizations.

In turn, this kind of energy and interest needs to be shared with clients and patients by communicating the mission and service culture of the organization. Let them know why doing business with your program is different from dealing with others.

Creating this culture requires some key steps:

- Create a clearly defined culture/style of doing business. What's your style? Are you open to people working to build the organization and services? Are new ideas or criticisms welcome and worked through?
- Encourage communication. Think of it in all forms, using the right mechanisms. Work to create personal connectivity with team members, patients, and customers.
- Hire people whose communication style fits your organizational culture.
- Train and coach people on communication. Many people today haven't been provided with training on the right way to communicate. So, set the standards, craft a way to teach, and guide people appropriately the one-to-one and small-team dialogues. Crafting a culture that encourages people to talk, challenge, and passionately discuss their work

Take a Look Inward

Communicating today means striking a balance between using "modern" technology, like e-mail, while continuing to find ways to reach out and connect, focus on the message, and follow up with your internal and external customers.

As you consider ways to improve your organization's ability to connect with others, use these questions as some food for thought:

- What can you do in your organization to make it stand out?
- How do you find and hire people who do this?
- How do you train them to be better communicators and how do you evaluate that?
- How do you help a manager or salesperson?
- How can you develop satisfaction surveys that get at this issue?
- How do you give an employee feedback if they're not communicating?



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