

## Marketing Savvy: The Challenges of Small and Rural Communities

*This article originally appeared in the Occupational Health Tracker, Summer 2003, Vol.6, No.2. Reprinted with permission of Occupational Health Research, www.systoc.com*

by Carolyn Merriman, BFA

Every marketplace has its sales and marketing nuances, but small and rural communities are truly unique. They're the places where everyone knows everyone, where business is done with a handshake, and where trust and credibility are held in high regard.

Whether you're already offering services in this marketplace, or are contemplating an expansion into these communities, today's occupational health environment makes it a critical time to shore up your weaknesses, examine your objectives honestly, and be prepared.

### What Are These Markets Facing Today?

To gauge your potential success in marketing your services to these communities, you first need to understand their market conditions. Small employers—75 employees or less—are especially focused on economic survival. Recession, higher healthcare costs, and increasing overhead mean that companies may be tempted to buy only what is mandated by law, such as workers' compensation services or testing for the regulated workforce.

The flip side of this, however, is that small and rural communities are tight-knit, and companies may be more dedicated to investing in their employees, and therefore, the well-being of their community.

Do your homework and understand the unique factors impacting the community you're looking at. Does one employer support the community (think of Gateway in South Dakota, or L.L. Bean in Maine)—and thus seek community health services donated by your organization on their behalf? Or does the marketplace include many small companies that may require a wide variety of services?

### Decide If You Want to Pursue This Market

Before you throw your hat into the ring or decide to expand your offerings, step back and take a hard look at what you're getting into:

- Who is your competition in this marketplace—big-city hospitals, federal rural health centers, freestanding urgent care centers, physicians in private practice or privately-owned clinics?
- What are the benefits of entering/staying in the marketplace?
- What is the competition doing to attract and retain clients?
- What do they do well and what makes them different from other providers?
- What, if any, is your presence in this community?
- Why do you want to be in this business; what kind of relationship do you want to have with employers; what do you expect to gain?

## Once You've Decided: Crafting a Strategy

Whether you already have an occupational health program and want to expand into small or rural markets, or you're just starting one, you have to have a plan. This is the time to think first and act second—too many hospitals end up offering occupational health services as an afterthought, rather than as a carefully crafted choice.

Take the time to research and write a plan that addresses the needs of this market, what you can do for the employers there, and how you intend to do it. Make sure that your leadership agrees to your plan, its desired outcomes, and your methods of achieving them.

## Plan Smart and Focus on Financials

- Research your intended market and customer base. Know the market opportunity *and* the customer needs and expectations.
- Have a business plan.
- Do a financial projection—figure out what you'll need in terms of physical space, staff, supplies, technology, marketing, and advertising. Determine what it will take to break even or show a profit.
- What are the "must-haves" for offering a program that supports the community's needs and complies with occupational health and workers' compensation regulations?
- Examine the employers in the community and rank your prospects by their potential value. Ranking can be done by political value (an employer on your hospital's board) or by potential revenue value (low-volume users would rank as softer prospects).

## Plan to Connect with the Community

Key components of implementing your plan are *relationship building* and *communication*. They're important factors in any size market, but in small and rural communities, they're critical. As a business member of this market niche, you have the opportunity to be a thread in the fabric of the community. In fact, in order to gain the confidence and respect of the community, you need to be a viable member.

David Mount, marketing and business manager at Goodall Occupational Health Clinics in Sanford and Biddeford, Maine, says that having a positive identity in the community is tremendously important. Operating in a small market "absolutely" makes a difference in the way people perceive the organization.

"Being involved in our communities holds us in good stead," he says. "We're active in chambers of commerce and we participate in a lot of chamber events to get out and meet and network. I think making personal contacts is critical, and it's doable because we operate in a relatively small territory."

## 7 Sales and Operations Tips

1. **People** in any size community expect a certain level of service. Consider this an opportunity to differentiate your program by raising the bar of expectations.
2. **Expect** everyone in your organization to be a salesperson in his/her own way. Hospital leadership, physicians, physician assistants, and nursing staff each have an opportunity to improve your visibility. Divide up your list of prospects and/or customers; plan appropriate ways in which each person on your team can have contact with prospects and clients.
3. **Look** at different models and ways to deliver a program. If a client is large enough, perhaps you can offer on-site programs. Or if it's a group of small

employers, put together a consortium. The Goodall clinics, which serve employers with an average of 50 to 90 employees, compensate for the industry-wide trend in declining injuries by enhancing other services. David Mount says, "We're really looking at wellness education and prevention programs and have been encouraging on-site nursing time; that's been a big push." The clinics have and staff their stores a fixed number of hours each week.

4. **Be proactive** in building relationships with prospects. For "A" accounts (most important and valuable), plan regular contacts every 4 to 6 weeks; for "B" accounts, every 2 to 3 months; and for "C" accounts, every 6 months, supported by other means of communication.
5. **Communicate** through e-newsletters or faxes. And, if your hospital has a call center, capitalize on an already-recognized program and create a web site for services and education. Since December, Goodall Occupational Health Clinics has sent a newsletter to employers via e-mail. The outreach, says Mount, has been well received by readers and has generated a healthy number of hits.
6. **Promote** occupational-health education. Hold educational forums, some hosted at your hospital/clinic, and others perhaps hosted by one of your clients in their workplace. Involve your clients in case-study presentations at the forums, so they can share their success stories (which are your success stories!) with their business peers.
7. **Be sensitive** to multi-tasking responsibilities. Make sure to cross-train all staff involved in occupational health. You'll ensure better customer service, patient flow, coverage for the services sold, and back-office efficiencies.

### **Keep Your Mission in Sight and Gain Loyal Customers**

Taking your products and services to small and rural communities is an opportunity to reap steady, loyal business. You'll be entering a marketplace where everyone is interested in investing in the community's success, and where there's less emphasis on price shopping, and more on making long-term relationships.

"No matter where you are in this business, I can't stress customer service enough," says Mount. "I think especially in a small community where everybody knows everybody and word travels fast in a company, service is the primary thing we focus on. It truly wins business." Smart marketing is an opportunity to extend your name, your mission, and your deliverables. When you do it right—by practicing what you preach and leading by example—you'll distinguish yourself from competitors as a community partner, and show that you are truly there to help and heal.

Find more helpful tips and information on marketing your organization to small and rural markets from Corporate Health Group's web site at [www.corporatehealthgroup.com](http://www.corporatehealthgroup.com).



Carolyn Merriman, President, Corporate Health Group,  
[www.corporatehealthgroup.com](http://www.corporatehealthgroup.com), 1-888-334-2500