

“We Don’t Sell Here ...This is Healthcare”

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“But, We Don’t Sell!”

At a recent national conference, we overheard this far-too-often-uttered comment: “We don’t do sales.” Many people who work in healthcare are of the opinion that sales is unprofessional, unethical and – a little slimy. Sales-people who use clichés like, “What would it take to get you behind the wheel today?” or “Can you afford not to buy right now?” have provoked negative images for all of us. It’s taken some work to take the stigma out of sales and re-emphasize the benefits of a great sales experience.

Impossible Dream?

Step back for a moment and think about positive sales interactions that you have had. Maybe it was with a financial planner who truly had your best interests (not only her commission) in mind, or a discharge planner helping with placement for a relative who took the time to listen – or even with a retail sales person who not only waited on you with a smile, but found the one pair of shoes left in the country. The common denominator? Exceeding your expectations for service while making the sale.

Process and Outcomes

As we widen our perspective and gain additional understanding of sales as a positive communication tool with a process and defined outcomes, it bears further consideration within the healthcare continuum. We have a diversity of customers and needs and because healthcare is very personal, we need to provide our customers with direct communication, caring, delivery of services to address their needs and the enhancement of service to Wow! them. This process of customer relationship management requires not just advertising, marketing or the best in clinical services, but the human touch – involving our entire organization’s team in personally “selling” the customer on why they should use our services. Additionally, the sales process and outcomes provide healthcare with the opportunity to not have to recreate the wheel – they can learn and borrow from demonstrated industry best practices and make the application to the healthcare environment.

Most of today’s experts in strategy and marketing believe the retail model is positive for healthcare. The core focus of a retail model is to design staff accountabilities for customer acquisition, retention and growth. The model also utilizes a process within the selling cycle for customer account management – reinforcing the life cycle of relationship development and

management. This model is easily applied to all of our customers; consumers, employers, payers and physicians.

Examples of retail model integration into healthcare are:

- Changes in how our marketing materials are designed and distributed,
- Assignments and accountability of sales/service staff to critical customer relationships,
- New facilities designed with a flow that is patient-friendly,
- A new focus on customer perceptions, wants and desires,
- And the use of service and education to reach out to our customer base.

Sales as a Relationship Model

Sales are a standard component within a retail strategy, right? As there are very few new frontiers available for new business in healthcare, we will be looking to shift business from our competitors. In a noisy marketplace, the organization that has demonstrated a differentiating benefit-oriented relationship with its customers will reap the rewards of capturing the customer and keeping them for their lifetime of healthcare decisions. A relationship sales approach needs to be explored more closely before deciding that it is not a fit within healthcare.

In a business model, sales is defined as the “exchange of goods or services for money or bartered items.” Corporate Health Group has further clarified this definition for the relationship model that is being used in healthcare.

Relationship sales is the process of matching the needs of the customer with the benefits your organization has to offer.

These transactions occur both internally – our employees and peers, and all external customer groups. Most of our daily exchanges are based on understanding the needs of others and using our expertise to fulfill this need. In exchange, the gain may be satisfaction, the assurance that the patient will feel positive about the care received, the bills will be paid and contracts will be signed.

The buy-in, however, becomes more difficult when the discussion turns to a more formalized sales activity. Some innovative organizations are looking at a relationship sales model for working with employers and physicians. The obvious expectation is that referrals and revenues would increase.

Differentiating Your Relationship

But, how does this occur? There is a process and approach within relationship sales and it relies heavily on a differentiated approach, a message that has value to the customer and ultimately customer education and buy-in. In an era where we are bombarded with messages, it is critical that organizations look for methods to “break through” the clutter with messages for its key stakeholders. Physicians’ time in the hospital is limited, Employers’ are buried in vendors materials and presentations, so there is

less chance to assimilate what is new, better and different.

Employers are contacted daily for their healthcare dollars and decisions – over \$80 billion annually in workers’ compensation dollars alone. They are seeking a partner in managing their healthcare costs and employee satisfaction with the benefits offered. Beyond assisting the employer in managing their incident rates and costs, we need to proactively position how we can work as their partners in changing the healthcare status of their employees and family members. While mass marketing and newsletters provide one vehicle of communication and are valuable, they are generally scanned not read. Sales needs to build the partnering position to provide the customer with access to education, screening, care and disease management and prevention. The sales approach allows for personal interaction with targeted audiences using education to position the services and offerings of the organization.

What is the Right Approach?

Because healthcare is – at any given time – personal, scary, intimidating and expensive, it is critical that healthcare providers establish trust and credibility first and always – no matter who the customer is.

Trust in Us

A relationship does not begin or grow without a bridge of trust. Some critical ways to initiate one’s sales approach to build trust and credibility are with a demonstration of:

- Propriety – externally reflecting the style, mannerisms and appropriate business attire and language
- Internally reflecting that you have a commonality of purpose and a commitment to the greater good on behalf of the client
- Skills, knowledge, expertise/specialty and tenure in the industry or position. This would include a demonstration of your title, credentials, client testimonials and service outcomes.

It is recommended that a professional process and approach be utilized in order to demonstrate respect for the customer. This is where the “slimy” sales people and places neglect to put themselves into the customer’s shoes, to reflect on what they like or don’t like about the sales process. There are critical steps for building a professional approach:

1. Planning – determine who is the optimum customer for your services and why? From that point, develop a message that provides a benefit of value to them and that assists them in meeting both personal and task needs.

2. Use a contact approach that philosophically fits your organization’s mission, culture and style. Build the approach to fit your sales person’s personality and style. This may mean a series of steps, such as public speaking, phone, direct mail for educational purposes, team selling with credible clinical team members and personalized letters and face-to-face meetings.

3. Train the sales and support staff in the sales cycle and customer management skills – from prospecting to closing. Make sure that the infrastructure to support the sales effort is in place.
4. Build a customer service model. What are your policies, procedures and issue resolution processes? Who is in charge of the customer relationship and when?
5. Finally, build expectations for outcomes of the sales and service of a customer. Have milestones and measurable accountabilities for customer acquisition, retention and growth.

Another critical element of trust and credibility is to have a sincere dialogue with the customer. The sales approach should always be focused on better understanding the customer's needs, wants and desires. Once you truly understand these, you will be able to match a differentiated solution while earning the first step of "owning their relationship for life." This is not the pitch that says, "What will it take to get you to buy today?" It is an approach that moves toward mutual gain through discovery, conversation, positioning of the options and understanding of who and how to make decisions.

Success within Healthcare

When we look for success stories within healthcare, they're abundant – especially the examples of employers and physicians as customers. One of the key reasons for success with these two customer groups is that of return-on-investment. It is easier to validate referrals, volumes and revenues by these customers than for consumers. While payers and consumers are also critical customers, the measurements and indicators of successful outcomes have either been on the acquisition of covered lives but not the value or on softer relationship measurements like involvement in wellness programming.

Consumers, more than any other health care customer group, is clearly ready to have their day. They are more sophisticated, educated and more proactively seeking healthcare information than ever before. Don't underestimate them or make assumptions about them as your customer. There has been a recent resurgence of call center, newcomer, and women and children's programs for this very reason.

Sales Models

Some organizations have redesigned their sales effort by customer groups with sales and services staff specializing on a target customer population. This approach has proven effective in that there is one point person serving as the liaison to the customer on behalf of the organization. They work internally to pull the resources and clinical staff together to meet the customer's needs.

Other models include defining a sales staff by clinical or service line specialty. This has proven particularly effective for home health, workers'

compensation and rehabilitation services. The one key downside to this model is the multiple sales and service staff all calling on the same customer – representing the same institution.

Why Now for Healthcare

Even if the relationship sales model makes sense for today, some might be skeptical that it is very short-lived. Some might even say we are going the wrong direction. There is a belief that personal interactions will be replaced since everything is moving toward technology. While technology may serve many of our service needs and it does have “mass appeal,” it doesn’t provide a proactive approach through solutions. Not to mention the lack of sincerity, credibility and trust for the value of a relationship. While technology sells widgets in a retail model fairly well – it will likely be quite a while before benefits workers send a patient for surgery based on the web site. Look at Amazon.com’s relationship strategy – remembering your name, your previous purchasing decisions, making upselling and cross selling recommendations. It still doesn’t have the personal touch of the store where you can personally peruse the book, the sales person who has read the book, met the author and can personally tailor your next book selections for you and your family.

Think About It

Healthcare is complex. Some of our valued customers, employers and physicians, are interested in a single source for information.

Maybe it’s time to evaluate a relationship sales strategy in your organization. Customize planned relationship strategies and tactics for the acquisition, retention and growth of your key customers. After all, if you don’t tend to the relationships and manage the level of trust with your own customer groups, the competition will be ready, willing and able. Consider sales and call it whatever you like, the rewards are significant.



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