

The Three-legged Stool of the Customer Experience in Radiology: Growth, Retention and Service

By Carolyn Merriman and Jill Stratton

In healthcare settings across the country, sales is becoming an accepted strategy for new business development and customer retention. But don't even begin to think the team member selling radiology services is similar to the pharmaceutical representative who delivers pill packs on a regular basis but rarely has a meaningful conversation.

Instead, the successful radiology and outpatient sales person focuses on building a relationship and delivering an experience. He is more visible, knowledgeable and accessible as a result of more frequent visits, deeper conversations and enhanced discussions about the outcomes the imaging technologies can produce. While office staff and physicians are very important audiences, this sales representative broadens his reach by educating and building relationships with other potential referral sources such as discharge planners, nurse practitioners, case managers and physician assistants.

The bottom line is that the connection between radiology sales representative and referral source must be relationship-based so that both parties are communicating effectively and benefiting from the outcomes of the relationship. In essence, the sales person is working to achieve something akin to favored nation status—when the healthcare provider has a patient with a radiology need, she immediately writes the order to use the sales representative's specialists and facilities.

The outpatient setting, particularly within radiology and diagnostic imaging, provides a huge opportunity to establish a sales strategy built on the organization's reputation for delivering an outstanding customer experience. A face-to-face relationship—whether between the provider and the patient or the sales person and the referral source—provides a personal and direct opportunity to build a trusted relationship.

When you view this opportunity as a three-legged stool supported by growth, retention and service, you'll see a way to use sales to educate your targets, position the value your organization and its offerings bring to the market, and drive success.

Growth is Good

The outpatient business model requires thinking more like a growth-oriented business, being more flexible and embracing change. Take the time to determine which service is best to grow and who the targets are to drive referrals to that service.

Consider these growth-related questions:

1. Is a competitor offering a new program in the market?
2. Do you have a market strategy to fill a service line capacity?
3. Are physicians in your market aligned and working with your facility or are they considering retirement, employment with a competitor or opening their own facility?

4. Are employers looking for ways to work directly with healthcare providers in an effort to slow the increases in their group and work health plans?
5. Are consumers informed and educated about the choices your organization offers?

Sales-driven growth requires recruiting, training and compensating the best sales staff. Self-motivation, discipline and the ability to persevere are critical sales traits. Behavioral-based interviews work well with sales candidates. Have them role play an office visit scenario or a challenging customer situation to test their speaking skills and their ability to think quickly on their feet.

While organizational, classroom and field training are all important, specific product training and exposure immerses the sales person into the organization's products or services from the customer's point of view. The employee needs to speak the language, know the people who interact with the customer, understand the actual procedures, be aware of staff and patient processes, and see how both the physician and patient benefit from the product.

Sales staff compensation should be tied to specific performance expectations. In a radiology program, performance targets for a representative might look like these:

- Achieve 15 to 25 face-to-face appointments per week with physicians or other clinical referral sources such as case managers, physician assistants or nurse practitioners for inpatient sales and double that for outpatient referral development.
- Facilitate five meetings per month between a senior-level radiology clinician and targeted primary care physicians.
- Arrange for five new referral sources to tour the radiology area each quarter.
- Increase referral volumes into radiology by 10%.

It is not solely up to the sales representative to achieve growth. The radiology technician plays an important role in this success as the face of service delivery to the patient. She must be customer focused and responsive to the needs of each individual. Show your employees how the organization wants to treat customers and build ways to continually recognize and reward proactive customer service behaviors.

The radiologist also plays an important role in this success. He must be supportive of the sales role and available to answer questions, visit new referral sources and provide ongoing support to existing referral sources. In areas that have been traditionally owned by other specialists, physician-to-physician selling is essential.

For example, some radiology clinics are utilizing a 64-slice CT for coronary CT in place of a diagnostic cardiac catheterization. To sell this newly emerging non-traditional approach, the radiologist needs to talk directly with the primary care physician about the clinical applications of this diagnostic procedure, the benefits to the patient and the ability for the primary care physician to maintain control of the patient case for a longer period of time.

Retention Through Relationships

Growing new business is important but don't lose sight of existing business that you can't afford to lose. Evaluate current business to determine which referral sources provide the most volume. Develop a specific retention strategy to maintain and enhance that critical relationship. Those referral sources expect to have the ear of a lead physician and senior leadership. The focus with this audience moves from convincing them to use your services to servicing their needs, delivering on your promises and providing operational fixes to problems. Assign specific radiologists to meet with the top referring primary care sources each quarter. Show the referral sources how your organization is listening to them and fixing operational issues.

In some cases, there is only room for a small amount of growth. In this situation, determine where you should focus your sales efforts for the most return. Focus on reinforcing top of mind awareness of your services and your customer-friendly approach.

For example, if a primary care office has its own basic imaging equipment, offer to support their office when a technician is out or equipment is down. Work with those practices to identify how your offerings can supplement and extend what they are able to do in their offices. In other cases, focus on secondary imaging services such as MRI, CT, breast MR or after-hours coverage as a niche and a point of differentiation. Your other services will benefit from the halo effect of that unique service.

Sometimes there is no room for growth, and a retention strategy is the single focus for sales. Strong relationships and customer responsiveness are your points of differentiation, coupled with a consultative selling approach. For example, visit the referring office once a week and ask if any patients are likely to require an MRI or CT in the coming weeks. Offer standing blocks of scheduling time or case management to patients of a high volume practice and establish strong communication between the practice and your facility. If you have cancellations, call those practices and offer the available times for any last minute patients.

Sales is Service

Great organizations are known for their service. Look outside of healthcare for role models and examples of outstanding service and ways to apply that to your facility. Consider these basic internal steps for your program.

- Develop a baseline of service expectations specific to your market and your product offerings.
- Understand what your competition offers and delivers and how your services differ.
- Develop process improvement plans to manage complaints or issues.
- Assign operational accountability for tracking, fixing and reporting on issues. If your sales staff is fixing problems, they won't be able to grow the business.
- Train all staff on messaging and responsiveness to be sure they know how to handle complaints.
- Reward customer-focused solutions and service behaviors.

Deliver outstanding service to referring physicians and other referral staff by being responsive to their needs with prompt scheduling, results reporting and necessary follow-up. Use physician-to-physician selling to help communicate expertise and quality.

As more radiology practices and clinics are doing procedures that previously were considered only in an in-hospital setting like the previously mentioned coronary CT, educate your targets on the benefits to the patient of the non-hospital setting. Use a physician-to-physician connection to discuss outcomes, clinical benefits to the patient, Medicare approvals and the like before selling the outpatient environmental perks such as easier access and parking.

In selling radiology or other outpatient services, it is important to create a relationship that's different from the competitor. Demonstrate this difference to the referral source and to consumers. When you clearly communicate (and sell) who you are, what your business is and how you do business, you'll have the base for a successful sales program. When that sales base is supported by the three legs of growth, retention and service, you'll see even more success through customer retention and loyalty and referral volume and revenue growth.

SALES SUCCESS FACTORS

- In radiology and other outpatient services, the sales function's success can be impacted by many factors including:
- The clinical program's capacity and access for additional volume.
- Evaluation of market intelligence on all audiences including physicians, customers, competitors and employers.
- Leadership buy-in of the sales strategy and support through resources, training and budget.
- Newer, better, faster and more accurate equipment, technology and services than other providers in the market.
- The market's view of your organization as the preferred provider that delivers exceptional service and value.
- Your organization's commitment to build ongoing relationships with customers.

THE 3 A's OF GROWTH, RETENTION AND SERVICE

Consider the top three reasons a healthcare provider refers to a provider or facility.

#1 Affability – they treat me with respect and are nice, approachable and empathetic

#2 Availability – they take my call or call me back, can accommodate me and my patient in a reasonable amount of time

#3 Ability –they have all of the necessary technology and expertise for me and my patient

Raise the bar on your 3 A's! Remember that ability can easily be matched by your competition while affability and availability are what gets them and keeps them as a valued customer.



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