



5 Tips for Marketing Your Cancer Program

by Theodore E. Wolfe, M.B.A.

Today's uncertain economic climate has forced many hospitals and cancer programs to cut costs and be creative in marketing their services. Here are five marketing ideas that work:

1 FOCUS, FOCUS, FOCUS

Conducting focus group studies are an important start to any successful marketing program and can help a cancer center understand how patients, family members, and the general public view their program and services. Focus groups should include individuals of all ages who are representative of your marketplace (i.e., people who have been treated for cancer, relatives and friends of individuals who have been treated for cancer, and people with no prior cancer experience). The information culled from these focus groups—both positive and negative—can help shape the direction of your marketing efforts.

2 TAILOR YOUR APPROACH

Develop a public relations event unique to your marketplace. Our community cancer center hosted a "Hat Luncheon" that quickly became a successful annual event to raise awareness about skin cancers. We decided on this particular theme because 1) many women like to wear hats, 2) oftentimes women make the health care choices for their families, and 3) people in the South need to be very conscious of the sun and its potentially harmful effects.

Although the event was not free, our cancer center contributed money to reduce the cost of attendance. Tickets to the luncheon were sold in department stores that featured ladies' hats, and the creative aspect of the event attracted both newspaper and television coverage.

In addition to a keynote speaker, we provided educational information about skin cancer and the importance of sunscreen and literature describing our program and services.

3 SHOP AROUND

Partnering with local stores or shopping malls can be beneficial for both parties. During the week prior to "Cancer Survivor's Day," a local department store allowed our cancer center to set up a display table at the entrance to the mall. The eye-catching exhibit offered shoppers information on cancer and cancer prevention, including information about our program and coupons for purchasing merchandise in the store. While developing partnerships with local merchants and other community organizations can be time-consuming in the beginning, your efforts can lead to long-lasting relationships and popular annual events in your community.

4 MAKE THE NEWS

Four young female news anchors at a local television station worked with us to implement a community program to encourage women to work with a "buddy" to carry out monthly breast self-examinations. We applied for and received a grant from the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation to help defray the cost of the program.

Once a month for 12 months, the news anchors used on-air time to remind one another to do their breast self-examination. They encouraged their television audience to contact our cancer center to participate in the program. Our cancer center also obtained sorority support from three regional universities and provided students with educational information about the importance of breast cancer examinations.

5 HOST A PARTY

Focus on reaching providers in the community, particularly those who may refer patients for cancer services. Our cancer center hosted several successful "open houses" with catered food and entertainment for physicians and physician extenders. Open houses are a prime opportunity to showcase your facility and services and offer attendees an opportunity for networking and socializing. This type of event can be both entertaining and educational, showing potential referring physicians that your cancer center stays current with research and the changes in cancer care.

At one formal dinner, our cancer center arranged for the keynote address to be delivered by a professor from a hematology/oncology fellowship program at a local medical school. The speaker talked about PET scanning immediately prior to Medicare approving PET as a payable diagnostic procedure.

The key to successful community marketing is to balance the interests of your cancer center with the interests of the community. Events and programs that tie together entertainment, education, and marketing tend to be the most successful. Remember to use your most effective and least expensive marketing tool—your staff. Satisfied patients who are treated with respect and dignity will respond favorably when asked about your cancer center, and personal referrals have been proven to produce more business for hospitals than any other marketing strategy. ☐

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