

Great Expectations

Marketing Your Cancer Program

Is your cancer center providing the “value” your patients expect?

by Mark J. Dubow, MBA, MSPH

Today, many cancer centers are not meeting their patient volume and revenue goals. When asked to account for these shortfalls, cancer program administrators often blame four factors: 1) a decline in reimbursement, 2) the entry of a strong competitor into the marketplace, 3) an increase in regulatory requirements, and/or 4) the loss of key physicians. Although these may all be significant issues, two more insidious factors may account for volume and revenue shortfalls:

- Gaps between the “value” patients seek and what they actually experience
- Gaps between the information patients use to evaluate and select a cancer center and the information cancer programs use in their marketing and communications activities.

Cancer centers that address these two issues and determine what customers (patients) value most will gain an important competitive edge.

Matching Message to Market

Most cancer centers use six clinical characteristics to competitively position their program:

- A full continuum of diagnostic and therapeutic oncology services
- A longstanding track record of successful clinical outcomes
- A staff led by renowned physicians
- Cutting-edge technology
- A large patient volume
- An active leadership position in oncology clinical trials.

At first glance, these characteristics seem like strong selling points because they all speak to a high-quality cancer program. But cancer centers using this approach face two significant drawbacks.

First, the cancer center is sending a message very similar to that of other cancer programs. How does this message differentiate the center from its competition? Not at all. The message does little to help maximize the center's patient referral base or its income stream.

Second, these six program features are oriented to and

reflect elements valued by cancer care providers. These elements may or may not be valued by the cancer center patients. Marketing strategies that emphasize elements valued by providers may only partially address—or even completely ignore—the values sought by patients. The bottom-line question is—does your cancer center's message speak to your target markets? Your message should motivate your patients to select or stay with your cancer center.

Put in marketing terms: “The absence of competitive product quality will keep a supplier [cancer center] from even getting to the door. But, once he is in, quality acts merely as his entry fee. All it does is allow him to line up for the race. At that moment, competition begins. The winner is the supplier who delivers not the highest quality product, but the highest quantity of customer value.”¹

Of course, your cancer center's primary goal is to provide the highest quality cancer care. However, working to maximize your center's patient referral base and its income stream are critical ways of supporting your center's ability to provide state-of-the-art care.

The “Patient's” Value Equation

Patients who share similar expectations can be grouped into a *market segment*. Successful cancer centers identify the target markets they want to serve and then design competitive positioning strategies specific to those market segments. Understanding what value means to your customers is an important first step.

The value patients assign to a cancer center is a measure of both the benefits they seek and the cost they pay to obtain those benefits. This value can be expressed by a mathematical equation: *Benefits – Cost = Value*. Patients who feel that they have paid a high-dollar cost to receive few services would not assign a high value to their cancer center.

Value is not just a monetary matter. While cost generally refers to out-of-pocket expenditures, it may also include intangibles such as time. So, for example, patients who wait for long periods of time to receive services or those who feel that lengthy treatment regimens are consuming time they might be using to pursue other valued



activities may assign a high cost to the experience and a correspondingly low value to the cancer center providing those services. Keep in mind, each patient's value equation is unique.

A patient's value equation plays a key role in selecting a cancer treatment program. Patients who place great value on receiving specific benefits and services from a cancer program may place less emphasis on dollar cost and more importance

on accessing those specific benefits or services. Such patients may devote considerable effort educating themselves about cancer and cancer care providers. They may shop around for the cancer center they believe will best meet their expectations for care and services. Some of these patients and their families may travel significant distances and make personal sacrifices to receive the benefits they value.

Other patients may operate under a different value


8 Ways to Market on a Shoestring Budget

Marketing is far more than advertising. An ongoing, continuous process, marketing is about creating and maintaining relationships. For cancer centers, marketing is usually aimed at increasing market share (i.e., obtaining new patients and keeping existing patients). Even on a shoestring budget, your cancer center can market its program successfully by following eight simple tips.

1. Understand your goals before setting strategy and marketing tactics. Learn from the success and failures of other cancer centers.
2. Understand the value sought by your customers. Recognize how these elements and their priority differ between customer segments.
3. Examine your center's current market and ask how else it might be segmented. Identify approaches your cancer center could use to reach out to untapped or underserved market segments.
4. Be selective when choosing which marketing strategies to pursue. Develop a framework for focusing your strategies.
5. Make your marketing strategy compelling enough to ensure physician and staff buy in.

6. Apply successful retail techniques to fine-tune your marketing strategy. Think about ways your patients interact with your program and what you could do to improve that interaction. Would offering services such as fax or Internet connections be helpful? Brainstorm ways you can meet the needs of your patients and families after they leave your center (i.e., a third-party concierge service or boutique).

7. Enhance your center's existing physician referral network. One cost-effective step is to include a page on your center's web site tailored to and accessible by referring physicians. Use this page to introduce your oncologists, provide information about ongoing clinical trials, highlight center resources, and establish a method for easy, online physician referral.

8. Revisit your community newsletter. Marketing initiatives are built on interactions. A successful community newsletter can introduce your oncologists, build relationships between providers and patients, increase awareness of your program, and highlight your program's successes and accomplishments. Research has shown that patient success stories are also a popular feature of community newsletters. Finally, use your newsletter to motivate readers to contact you for more information or to participate in a free program or event at your center. 

Many factors, such as



age, disease site,

socioeconomic group, and ethnicity,

influence a patient's expectations of services and benefits.

equation. Some individuals may believe that most health-care providers offer basically the same quality of services, and their focus may be on obtaining the most services for their money. These patients may spend less time researching cancer center programs and assign a greater degree of importance to the dollar cost of the services.

A third category of patients may value certain services but also place a high value on obtaining treatment in their home community, as close to family and friends as possible.

Many factors, such as age, disease site, socioeconomic group, and ethnicity, influence a patient's expectations of services and benefits. Services and benefits sought by pediatric cancer patients and their families will differ from those sought by adults and seniors with cancer. A patient with breast cancer will seek different benefits and services from a patient with prostate or lung cancer.

Knowing what customers value can help a cancer center focus its marketing message.

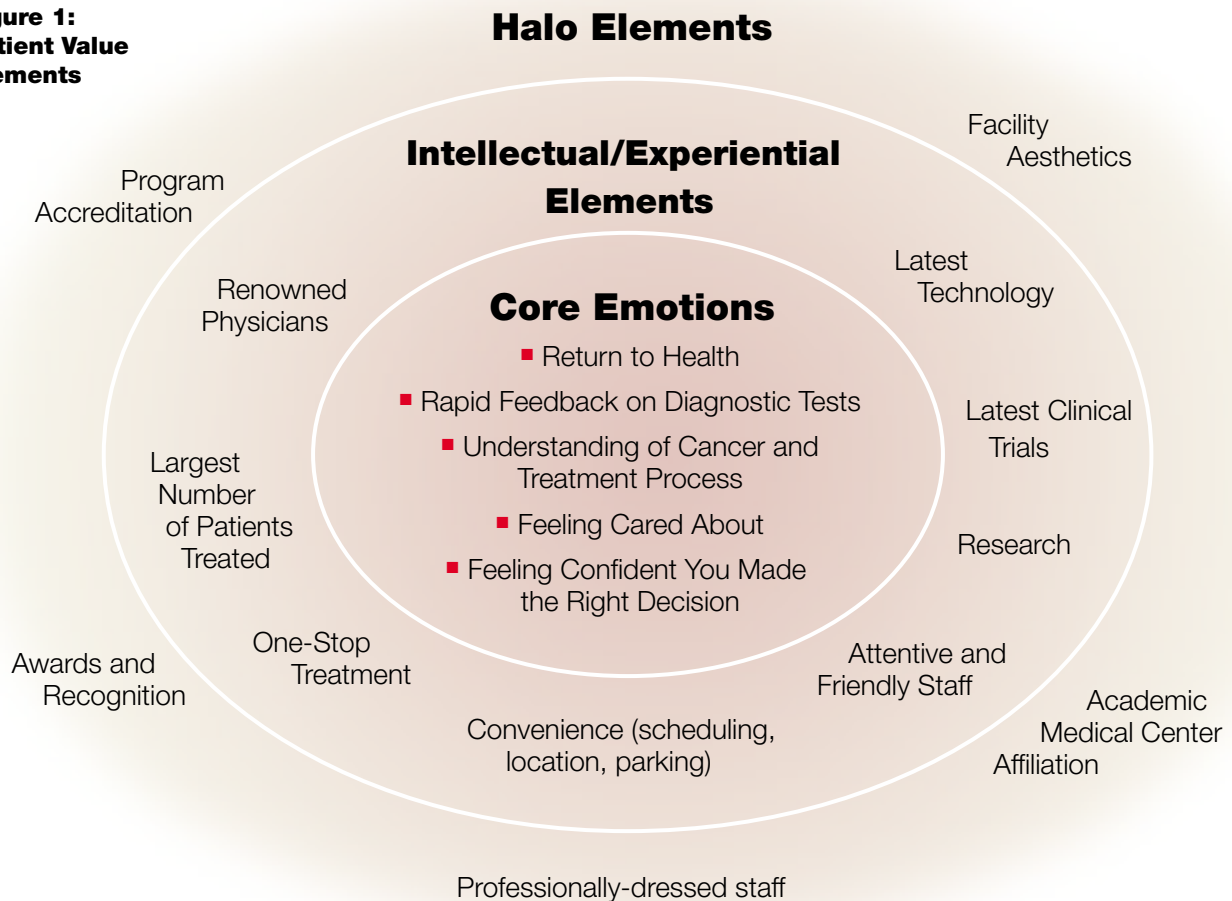
What Do Your Patients Value?

Learning what your patients really value is no simple task. Identifying patient value elements (see Figure 1) and then prioritizing those items can help. Value elements that address a patient's *core emotions* receive the highest priority. Next in importance are *intellectual and experiential elements*, and, finally, although important, *halo issues* are lowest priority.

Core emotions are the bedrock expectations that patients want a cancer center to meet. Most patients expect their cancer center to offer a promise of a return to health and retention of their pre-diagnosis lifestyle (to the largest extent possible) during the treatment process. Most

continued on page 28

Figure 1:
Patient Value
Elements



Growing Your Cancer Center

Growth is one of the top three items on the agenda of most health services organizations, and the oncology service line is frequently selected as a focal point for growth.

A number of approaches are available to the community cancer center that wants to grow its program. The first is to drive increased patient volume through existing service lines by enhancing existing or building new referral relationships, creating specialty centers (i.e., a breast care center or a prostate cancer center), and providing community-based screening and education to target specific patient populations. An important but underused technique is to expand the cross-referral of patients through pulmonology, urology, orthopedics, and other specialties.

A second way to grow your cancer program is to expand your service line and differentiate it from your competitors. Consider adding an entire program, such as for bone marrow transplantation services, or implementing a new clinical technology, such as CT/PET, IMRT, and stereotactic biopsies and minimally invasive surgery. Your cancer center should also think about establishing cancer-site specific programs.

Expanding or serving a new geographic or ethnic market can facilitate cancer program growth. Start by identifying unserved or underserved geographic niches that have attractive patient “pools.” Evaluate the incidence of cancer in the service area by ethnic group and then assess the extent to which each ethnic group is utilizing cancer screening, education, and treatment programs.

Growth may be achieved by forming care delivery systems using a “hub and spoke” model with an academic medical center acting as the hub in collaboration with several community hospitals. Alternatively, two or more community hospitals may elect to establish a cancer center through a joint venture. A third strategy is to develop patient-referral alliances with physicians at hospitals that do not offer a full complement of oncology services.

Cancer centers can use their clinical trials and ancillary services to generate revenue growth. Cancer patients have a high level of interest in gaining access to the latest protocols. Today’s cancer programs are successfully increasing patient preference for and use of their services by educating the target patient pool about the center’s participation in cutting-edge research and clinical trials. Ancillary services (e.g., pathology, radiology, pharmacy) used by cancer patients can be a significant revenue source, so cancer centers should assess if they are maximizing this revenue potential.

Cancer centers should look to growth strategies used by for-profit companies outside of the healthcare

industry. Possibilities might include building a program around entrepreneurial oncologists, clustering cancer centers regionally to encircle and dominate the market, and bringing the latest protocols and clinical trials to the local market care delivery site.

Adopt growth strategies and initiatives from successful companies such as Starbucks, Wal-Mart, and Jet Blue. Consider applying a “high-touch” atmosphere in a “high-tech” care environment (personal care team, low-rise buildings emphasizing greenery and flowing water) and selling products of interest to patients at the point-of-care (e.g., wigs, scarves, prostheses, food supplements).

Institutions looking to grow their cancer programs

Cancer centers should look to growth strategies used by for-profit companies outside of the healthcare industry.

should identify new patient entry points beyond the more traditional ones of referrals made by primary care physicians and community-based screening and education programs. Be creative in identifying other potential entry points and try expanding your focus to include care providers and screening programs in assisted-living facilities and retirement centers, allied health professionals, home health nurses, professional associations, unions, employers, and community organizations. Develop an interactive web site with education and self-screening activities and consider adding patient self-scheduling as an important new entry point.

In some instances, operational barriers block the growth of a cancer center. Frequent barriers include: limited accessibility (location, days/hours of operation, parking, scheduling), capacity restrictions, poor coordination in the delivery of interdependent services, old equipment, and patient flow. Resolution of such barriers can be a growth strategy for the community cancer center.

Whichever growth strategy you choose, keep in mind that these strategies are not one-size-fits-all. Begin by setting specific goals and then choose the strategy or strategies that best enable you to achieve those desired goals. It is rare for an organization and its medical staff to successfully pursue all the strategies discussed in this article. A cancer center will achieve a greater degree of success by prioritizing and pursuing a limited number of growth strategies at any one time. Most important, develop appropriate incentives and accountability measures to ensure that you successfully meet the goals you set for growing your cancer program. ■

Viewing the patient experience from a customer service perspective



patients also expect to be treated by clinicians who provide rapid feedback on diagnostic tests and help in understanding both the diagnosis and treatment process. Many of today's patients expect a patient-first treatment climate in which those providing diagnostic and therapeutic services care about the person and are not just "processing" a body. Finally, many patients want some confirmation that they've made the best choices in seeking treatment, the specific cancer center selected, and the form of care.

Since value elements that fall into the core emotions category reflect the patients' highest priority, a successful cancer center will satisfy these expectations. Cancer centers that go further and clearly communicate to patients *how* they meet these core expectations maximize their competitive position and improve their marketing program.

Intellectual and experiential value elements remain important to cancer patients and their families. The key to understanding these elements from a marketing perspective is to recognize that a high percentage of patients assume these features exist in most oncology programs. Because intellectual and experiential elements alone are generally not enough to sway a patient's choice of cancer centers, these features should not be the "hook" of your marketing efforts.

Still, a cancer center that understands *how* its patients value these characteristics can use intellectual and experiential elements to fine-tune its marketing plan. Those elements most valued by patients should be incorporated as descriptive elements within all marketing activities to improve the cancer center's competitive positioning. As always, the cancer center should stay focused on what its patients value and hope to gain from the center.

Intellectual and experiential elements might include:

- Having renowned oncologists on staff
- Providing state-of-the-art diagnostic and therapeutic technology
- Participating in the latest clinical trials
- Treating a high volume of patients
- Offering a one-stop shop for oncology care and related services
- Scheduling appointments with ease
- Providing a seamless continuum of care
- Offering a convenient location with adequate parking and easy navigation through the center
- Having attentive and friendly staff.

Halo elements include awards and recognitions, academic medical center affiliation, program accreditation, and professionally dressed staff. Recent reports in the media indicate that when consumers are selecting healthcare providers, they are not relying on published per-

formance reports, such as those in Healthgrades, Solucient, or *U.S. News & World Report's Top 100 Hospitals*. (See "Fast Facts" page 17.) Research has shown that patients and their families generally perceive most healthcare providers as offering an equivalent degree of clinical expertise, so halo elements are often not effective at creating preference for a particular cancer center. Yet halo elements are still valued by patients and should be incorporated into the marketing message as general descriptive features rather than focal points.

Once a cancer center understands these three tiers of patient value elements, it needs to identify those elements that its patients value most strongly within each tier. This is not an easy task, because the items of greatest value often vary from one market segment to another. To further complicate the issue, the benefits and services most important to patients may differ from the benefits and services valued by family members.

Pulling Ahead of the Competition

Successful cancer centers tailor their marketing messages to each target market segment. Even more important, their marketing strategy is based on *customer-defined benefit elements*.

Once your program has identified the value equations for your target market segments (patient populations), follow these three steps to build an effective positioning strategy:

- Identify gaps between what your patients expect and what they experience.
- Create proactive solutions to narrow those gaps.
- Communicate what you are doing to meet patient expectations to current and prospective customers.

Viewing the patient experience from a customer service perspective helps a cancer center focus on the needs of its patients and brings to light gaps in the services it provides. A cancer center must consider how to improve its patients' experience. Start by focusing on two areas—*atmosphere and service*. Often patients value a "healing environment" that might include a light, airy, warm atmosphere as opposed to a high-rise, high-tech environment.

Ask patients what would make their visit better. Options might include remote registration/scheduling; valet parking; transportation to/from the center; one-stop service (coordinated throughout); efficient progression through services each time they are on site; food and beverages available; a "second-opinion" clinic; rapid reporting of test results; and symptom management.

Think about services that may complement the clinical care patients are already receiving. A host of amenities could be made available to patients, including a posi-

helps a cancer center focus

on the needs of its patients and

brings to light gaps in the services it provides.

tive image shop; therapy programs—such as art, music, exercise, and massage; a resource library with computers; and personal video/DVD/music stations. Amenities that could improve family members' visits to your cancer center might include: Internet/fax access; screening of adult child of patient at same visit; and beepers for family members.

Your patients and their family members spend a significant amount of time at your cancer center during all the stages of the care delivery process. Identifying ways to make their time on site more comfortable benefits patients and also helps cement the patient-provider relationship.

Finally, a cancer center should consider the needs of its patients when they leave the center. When patients leave the cancer center, they do not stop being cancer patients. They have a whole array of ongoing issues to deal with, including health, psychosocial, and spiritual needs. If the patient-provider relationship ends when the patient walks out the door, there is a gap that needs to be filled. Consider providing: support groups (virtual and in person); a web site page of FAQs to address specific patient concerns such as post-care and what to expect from specific procedures; ready-to-go take home meals and food supplements; and/or a printed exercise guide.

Closing the Gaps

One useful tool for identifying and closing gaps is an internal review. This assessment allows a cancer center to compare its program with the competition. Couple this comparison with your patients' value element tiers (core emotions, intellectual and experiential, and halo elements) to improve your competitive positioning.

Primary and secondary research can also help a cancer center understand patients' perception of their experience and identify any gaps between the services they hoped to receive and those they actually received.

Primary research involves gathering information directly from the target customers. It can include focus groups, one-on-one interviews, questionnaires, telephone interviews, and observation. Some cancer centers hire research firms to apply one or more of these techniques. (See January/February 2003 *Oncology Issues* article on patient satisfaction surveys.)

A cancer center can also conduct its own primary research. With preliminary coaching and guidance, cancer center volunteers can serve as interviewers and focus group facilitators, interacting with existing or potential patients and/or their family members.

Cancer program management can interview cancer center staff to gain perspectives about patients. Although gathering input from the physicians and nurses is always

important, valuable insight is often provided by staff who interact with and observe patients and their families indirectly—such as security personnel, receptionists, volunteers, business office staff, housekeeping, and food service employees.

Friends or family members of the staff can be recruited to role-play as prospective patients, making telephone and online inquiries. These volunteers can do a walk-through of the cancer program following the same steps a patient would take—arrival at the front door, progress through reception and each step related to diagnostic and therapeutic services, and finally departure. Your cancer center may want to consider enlisting volunteers to do a similar walk-through at competing cancer centers. Thorough primary research would include a combination of the above techniques.

Secondary research involves reviewing information gathered from other sources, such as local, regional, and national cancer associations (e.g., the National Cancer Institute, the American Cancer Society, the Association of Community Cancer Centers). Other materials such as third-party publications, press releases, speeches, conferences, web sites, interviews with representatives from oncology-related organizations, and interviews with oncologists and other care providers all can provide useful information.

Cancer centers should use this primary and secondary research along with information on the center's capabilities, competencies, and those of competitors to develop a competitive positioning strategy. An effective marketing strategy emphasizes how your organization does a superior job of meeting the target audience's core emotion elements and also conveys how the organization satisfies at least a portion of its patients' intellectual/experiential and halo elements.

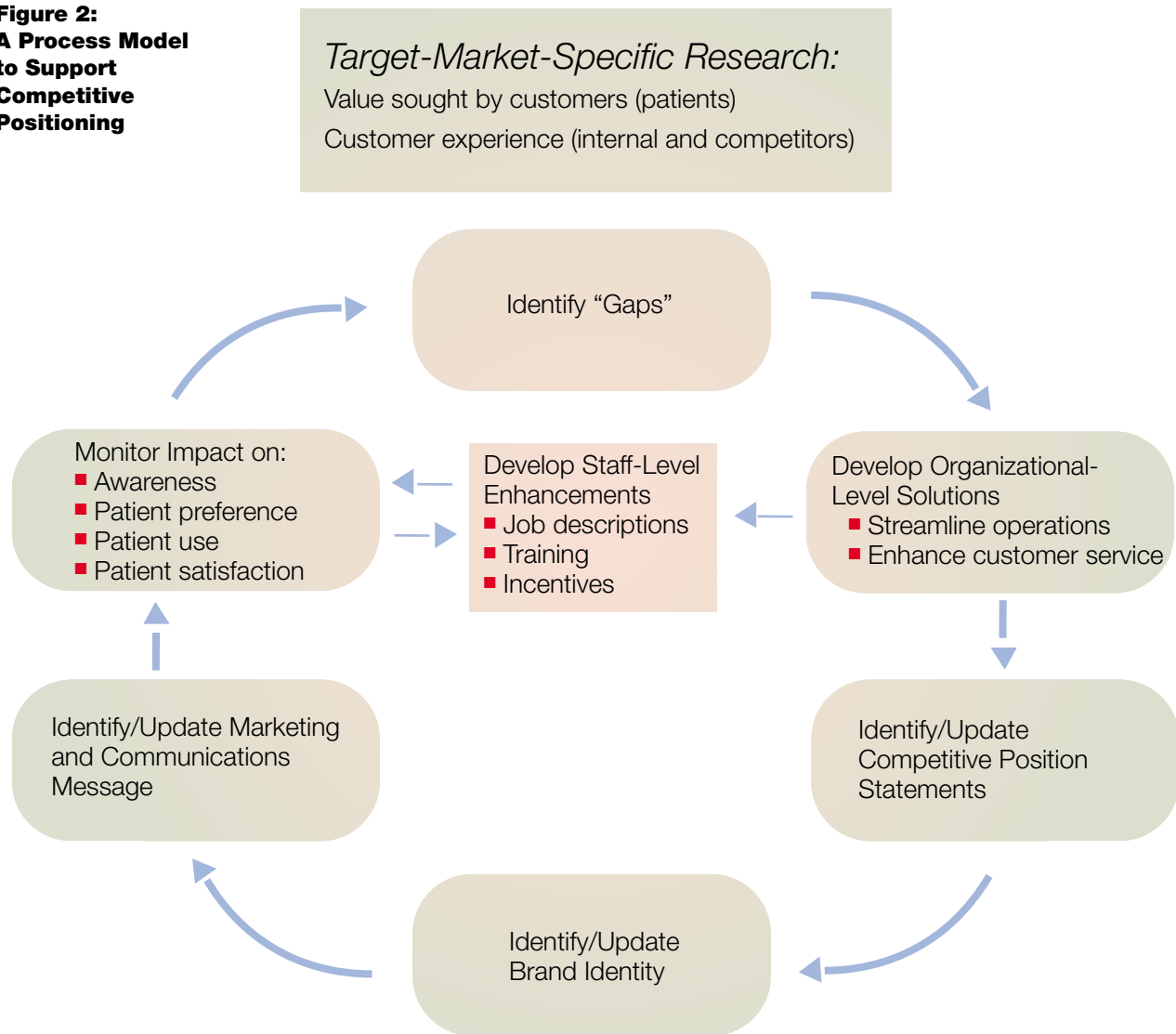
A Blueprint for Success

Figure 2 demonstrates how market-specific research, identifying gaps between patient expectation and experience, and organizational solutions can be integrated into a process model useful in setting a competitive positioning strategy. The model includes several additional components, which help convert the positioning strategy into operational tactics:

Develop staff-level enhancements. The cancer center should develop staff job descriptions that incorporate accountability for delivering an experience consistent with its patients' value expectations. In tandem with this, the organization should implement appropriate employee incentives.

Identify and update message. Marketing activities and communication materials should effectively convey

Figure 2:
A Process Model
to Support
Competitive
Positioning



to target audiences that the cancer center understands what these potential patients value and is dedicated to meeting those expectations.

Monitor the impact of your marketing program. The cancer center should assess the effect that its marketing and communications activities have on its patients' awareness, preference for, and use of the cancer center, as well as satisfaction with the services offered.

As you can see, the work does not end with the development and implementation of a competitive positioning strategy or the development of a comprehensive marketing campaign. A cancer center must continuously monitor how well its marketing activities are communicating its message to target patient populations. Initially, this assessment can be performed on a quarterly basis to allow for timely updates. Once the cancer center is satisfied that its marketing message is achieving the desired result, it may choose to conduct this analysis on a semi-annual or annual basis.

The cancer center should also continually assess and update its understanding of its patients' benefit expectations as well as its perceptions of the patients' actual expe-

rience. Research should be conducted frequently (i.e., semi-annually) until the cancer center is confident that it accurately understands the value equation of its targeted audiences. The center should remain proactive in identifying gaps between value sought and value realized by its patients and then resolve those gaps faster and more creatively than the competition.

A cancer center's success in applying this model depends on its ability to focus on a selected number of target market segments and to understand value from the perspective of each patient population. Following this blueprint for success will help your cancer center strengthen its competitive position. ■

Mark Dubow is a vice president of The Camden Group, a healthcare consulting company in El Segundo, Calif. He specializes in organization strategic planning and service line business development.

References

¹Hanan M, Karp P. *Competing on Value*. American Management Association. New York, NY; AMACOM Books; 1991, p. 7.