

Marketing Your Ambulatory Practice

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INTRODUCTION

An ambulatory care pharmacy practice, like any other type of business, requires marketing to be successful. Without it, a patient may not be aware that your service exists, a healthcare provider may not refer patients to you, an administrator may not include you in organizational plans, or a payer might not consider providing reimbursement for your services. Each of these scenarios decreases the likelihood of continued viability for your ambulatory care practice model.

Marketing is commonly mistaken as simply promoting an existing product or service, but according to the American Marketing Association, marketing is the “processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.”¹ Hillestad and Berkowitz in their book on healthcare marketing provide a definition that may resonate more with you as a clinician:

Chapter Objectives

- Identify the phases a consumer goes through during the decision-making process.
- Recognize service characteristics that increase marketing difficulty and identify strategies to overcome the barriers.
- Compare and contrast different methods for conducting market research.
- Plan and execute an appropriate marketing strategy.

*Marketing is the process of understanding your customers' wants and needs, listening to those wants and needs and then, to whatever extent possible, designing appropriate programs and services to meet those wants and needs in a timely, cost-effective, competitive fashion. It is the process of molding your services to the market, rather than convincing the market your services are what they need.*²

There are several key concepts in both of these definitions. First is the word *value*. You, as an ambulatory care pharmacist, may feel that the service you provide, no matter what its setting, has the ability to help patients achieve better health outcomes, but this does not necessarily equate to value for others. It is the user of the services who needs to feel your care is beneficial so they will exchange their offering of value: time and money. Second is the word *need*. You may have been trained in your residency to provide a diabetes-related service, but in the patient population you are planning to service, diabetes may be well controlled due to other providers or payer incentives already in place. Although it may be ideal and easier to create a service in which you are experienced, this may not be the need in the clinic in which you are proposing your service. If you do not understand the needs of your market, your attempts to add another cog into a currently well-oiled wheel may not work. Rather, you need to use those same skills to build a service that will meet something your customers are not currently doing well.

CASE

Preparing your business plan allowed you to reflect on various consumer behaviors you will need to address in your marketing strategy. The first step is to create a strategic diagram that shows each group and how they intersect. This gives you some ideas of how to get started, especially with the administration of the practice as they are in a prepurchase phase.

Stand back and take a moment to organize your thoughts to create a strategic approach to marketing your services such that it will optimally be utilized. Strategic thinking has been defined in many ways; the one we particularly like is your capacity to think conceptually, imaginatively, systematically, and opportunistically to attain success. Approaching your new service from a marketing and strategic thinking perspective will assist you in laying out the marketing steps to have the greatest impact. A great way to use strategic thinking is to look at your service in the grand scheme, understand the setting, how the practice you are integrating in currently operates, and what your services will bring to the table. In manufacturing, the complete process of attaining raw materials to selling a finished product is called a value chain, as each individual step along the way adds value. Think of your ambulatory care service as a step in the value chain, adding important clinical services to the process. To best add value, you will need to work in harmony with others in the chain, adding the services for optimal patient care and desired health outcomes. This is where understanding what is needed in a particular clinic is important, because it will allow you to showcase what you can offer. A value proposition is a statement that summarizes the benefits your service can bring to your customers and showcases your contribution to the value chain. A value proposition will define what your practice will uniquely contribute, and how this will serve the patients, providers, payers, and administrators. For example, if an existing practice has incorporated a population health initiative, what are the metrics they are targeting, and how do you integrate your model into the workflow? Strategic thinking