

A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing: The Health Care Controversy as Customer Service Opportunity

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PUBLIC RELATIONS
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Physicians used to be careful at parties about revealing what they did for a living in order to avoid the inevitable "would you look at this rash for me?" reaction. Nowadays, however, their hesitation may come from a desire to duck a grilling about the current health care debate.

While insurance companies, big pharm and, of course, the government receive most of the heat, physicians themselves do not have a free pass in today's heated environment. Many don't understand that primary care physicians and even some specialists are struggling to break even. People may not realize that physicians themselves are as frustrated as their patients that they must move at a brisk clip through their appointments.

This, though, is not the time for physicians to change the subject when someone brings up healthcare reform. As a matter of fact, now is the time for medical practices to take a good hard look at their marketing strategy and be sure it includes communication about these important current events.

Medical marketing basics include the following:

- Know who you are, what you do and what makes you special.
- Deliver excellent medical care.
- Provide superior customer service.
- Communicate the above to your target customers, be they patients, referring physicians, insurance providers, your board, your staff...

Patients today expect "customer service" from their doctor's office in a way that was never true in the past, and they deserve it. One kind of customer service that physicians can and should provide is easy-to-understand information about health care. We always advise practices to make their waiting room and their web site healthcare information resources for their patients. Now, in today's volatile health care debate, we advocate that doctors also offer timely, accurate, completely non-partisan information about the issues involved in today's health care changes.

The information dissemination can use any or all of today's media, from snail mail to web content to email to blog to Facebook to Twitter. You can write a one-time explanation and analysis, monthly updates, or editorials when news breaks. If the right staff support is there, you can invite email questions ... and answer them. At the very least, patients should find a one-page Fact Sheet in the reception area of the office.

People are worried, even scared. They want to understand the reform options and how they will be affected. Respect for the profession may have eroded a bit since the iconic Norman Rockwell painting, but patients still welcome factual communication from their physicians. Fact-based communication from someone whose only agenda is to improve access and outcomes and decrease costs can help patients sort fact from fiction. Those who get all their information from watching town hall meetings on television or listening to talk radio will be making health care – and ballot - decisions based on misinformation.

Doctors are in a unique position to inform the current debate because they understand the intricacies of health care delivery and, few would dispute, have a vested interest in a system that

will allow doctors to provide excellent care and patients to afford it. Offering patients solid information about what is happening and how it might affect them is excellent customer service. And the confidence patients gain in their physicians can positively impact patients' attitudes about their own health care as well as of the doctors who provide it.

"Why do you go to Dr. Smith?" asks the new neighbor. "Because he's a terrific doctor and he takes the time to explain things to me."

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