

## 5 Tips to Improve a Hospital's Brand

Written by Lindsey Dunn ([Twitter](#) | [Google+](#)) | July 29, 2011

Hospital consumers are increasingly becoming more sophisticated. As their consumerism grows, the importance of transparency and value will increase, and, as is the case in sectors outside healthcare, so will each organization's "brand." Steve Rivkin, founder, Rivkin & Associates, a healthcare branding and communications consultancy, and co-author of *Repositioning: Marketing in an Era of Competition, Change and Crisis* (McGraw-Hill, 2010) offers five tips to improve a hospital or health system's brand.

**1. Think of your brand as a promise.** A hospital's brand is a promise of what the consumer should expect and how the hospital will perform, says Mr Rivkin. "Think about a brand in the same way as a person's reputation. You earn a good reputation by doing the right thing, doing it well, and doing it consistently. And just like a reputation, a brand is a living entity — it evolves, and it is enriched or undermined by your actions," he says.

**2. Understand your strengths, weaknesses.** Any hospital's branding efforts should begin with an understanding of its market share, strengths, weaknesses and consumers' perception and beliefs about its services. Consumer research should ask community members what they think is important when choosing a hospital, how the hospital is perceived and how it compares to competing facilities, says Mr. Rivkin. This research will reveal if the hospital is preferred, and if it isn't preferred, will give some indication of why it's not preferred.

Mr. Rivkin notes that consumer perceptions don't always match reality, but it's perceptions that influence volume. "Marketing has to deal with [these perceptions]," he says. "[Hospitals should] communicate what they have done and what they are prepared to do to change perception."

No matter the hospital's current position in the market, communications efforts around brand should reflect reality. For example, a market share leader with outstanding quality scores can highlight how it outperforms competitors. An ailing hospital with low consumer preference, on the other hand, would need to focus on its commitment to improvement.

"It's action first, communications second," says Mr. Rivkin. "Communications is the mirror that you hold up to your performance. Eighty-five percent of changing a perception is what you actually do, and only 15 percent is what you say about it."

**3. Differentiate.** After identifying areas of strength and improvement, hospitals should determine what differentiates it from competitors and whether that point of differentiation is important to consumers. According to Mr. Rivkin, potential differentiators include:

- The patient experience— for instance, best customer service/patient satisfaction scores in the market;
- Centers of excellence for specific service lines;
- Heritage/history in a community;
- Highest rated physicians;
- Industry awards received (top hospital lists, Magnet status, etc.);
- Newest technology/cutting-edge procedures; and
- Widest range of services in market area.

**4. "Sell" the brand to employees first.** After determining how a hospital will position itself, hospital leaders should sell that identity or brand first to its employees. "Your workforce is a critical part of a branding program. Everything starts with your own people," says Mr. Rivkin. "I'll put it this way: Don't expect to persuade the folks outside about much of anything, unless the people inside believe it first."

How have hospitals promoted a new branding effort to employees? Typically, they preview the new campaign internally — via the hospital intranet, email or newsletter, says Mr. Rivkin. "A PDF of a new advertisement or TV storyboard gives employees that important first look. And then make a fuss over the new branding, with coffee mugs or cafeteria posters to make it real – and fun...and as the campaign rolls out, keep employees in the loop with occasional updates about new messages or special media buys."

**5. Market the brand and connect it to the bottom line.** After gaining buy-in from employees, hospitals should take their branding messages to the public through public relations efforts, advertising, direct marketing and other methods. Hospital marketers should be careful to quantify the results of all efforts — a step many hospital marketing departments stop short of. "With everyone being squeezed on revenue and reimbursement, we should hold marketing accountable for results," says Mr. Rivkin. "The basic idea is that if it doesn't get measured, it can't really be managed."

Measuring return on investment will direct hospitals toward the most effective marketing tactics. "Consider a typical program to reach out to newcomers in the community. A hospital in Indiana reported on sending information packets and gifts to new residents, a program that cost \$400,000. Within 18 months, their IT department identified \$720,000 in patient revenues from new people who had never shown up before on admissions and discharge records.," says Mr. Rivkin.

Mr. Rivkin also pointed to a hospital in the South that discovered its free EKG screenings resulted in increased patient

volume and produced \$6 million in charges. "The simplicity of the test itself was part of the success story — the EKG results were graded as either normal, borderline or abnormal. The report was mailed to the consumer within two weeks. In their analysis of 875 screenings, there were 181 people whose results showed borderline or abnormal results, and 162 of them (90 percent) followed up with the hospital's call center for a physician referral, an inquiry about the result, or for information about agencies that help the uninsured."

Mr. Rivkin cautions, however, that some screenings are not as successful in terms of ROI. For example, gastric bypass seminars typically have a very long lead time before any action is taken by a patient, which makes tracking an immediate bottom line impact very difficult.

Mr. Rivkin believes a bottom-line orientation should be top-of-mind for all hospital marketers. "You should be asking yourself: How have we followed up with attendees at that [event]? How many new patients were acquired? How much revenue was generated? Can we project a "lifetime" value of these new relationships?"

In addition to providing a solid, short-term return on ROI, successful branding program can lay the foundation for long-term relationships with consumers as well as attract high-level talent to the organization.

*Steve Rivkin founded the consultancy that bears his name in 1989. He has worked on more than 90 hospital and healthcare system assignments, ranging from marketing audits to crisis counsel. He is a nationally-respected expert on marketing and communications, and is the co-author of six books on marketing strategy, differentiation, innovation and communication.*

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