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Taking a Different Point of View

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Listen to the customer. That’s lesson
No. 1 in business. But is that what we really
do in healthcare? Clearly we don’t listen
enough, especially in our marketing and
communication strategies.

On a chilly New Hampshire autumn
evening about two years ago, we ran a
focus group of likely orthopedic patients
that hammered home this point. The
question was simple: What information do
you rely on to determine what makes for

the importance of knowing these four numbers:
blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar and
BMI. The site explains the various strategies that
people can employ to improve these numbers
and also explores the financial advantages of
doing so. For example, having a cholesterol
number below 240 could save $353 on out-of-
pocket costs a year and a total of savings of
$1,644. These numbers were derived from the
"Cigna Comprehensive Evaluation of Outcomes
Based Incentives," February 1, 2015. The
numbers are calculated from Cigna customers
enrolled in employer-sponsored plans with more
than 500 employees and assumes a $2,000
deductible, 20 percent coinsurance and a $3,500
out-of-pocket max.

The commercial made its network debut on
Thursday Night Football on September 8 and
followed up with football on the next Sunday and
the Emmy Awards the following week. It was also
released to social media. In its first three weeks
out on social media, the commercial garnered a
little over seven million views on Facebook and
another 2.7 million views on YouTube.

For its own members, one way the health plan
will track just how effective its messaging is will be
to chart annual check-ups to see if there is an
increase, he says.

The campaign will continue at least through
2017 and is costing the company approximately
$9 million.
the best hospital or doctor experience? Their answer wasn’t star ratings and rankings from the big names, like U.S. News & World Report, Healthgrades or the Leapfrog Group. And it certainly wasn’t relying on hospitals themselves, constantly trying to one-up each other to brag about their amenities, technology and commitment to caring.

People wanted to hear from “patients like me.” “Just looking at stars doesn’t give me a lot of info,” one participant said, quite emphatically, to a room full of nodding heads. “When people write in and say the reason why they rated this two stars ‘is because I really didn’t like the reception,’ then I’m going to pay more attention to that.”

Bingo. It’s all about perspective. And today, patients care about their own perspective, not yours.

A Shifting Perspective
That’s a significant shift in viewpoint for us as American consumers. Over the past decade we have moved from a place where we sought out goods and services that we felt would be useful or beneficial, selecting from the available offerings, to one where we expect those delivering the goods and services to know us and tailor them exactly to us. Just think of all the “bespoke” services now available just about everywhere.

Today’s healthcare consumer is far less impressed by the superlatives handed out from organizations they consider to be “insiders” and which they perceive cater to and serve the interests of “Big Healthcare.” Instead, value is placed on what “patients like me” think, how they were treated and whether they would recommend a doctor or hospital.

In short, Yelp trumps Healthgrades in the minds of many healthcare consumers.

A recent story on The New York Times healthcare blog, titled “How Yelp reviews can help improve patient care,” quoted Naomi Bardach, MD, of UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital: “The power of stories is likely an important part of why Yelp and other online reviews are compelling. Stories add nuance and context to the otherwise somewhat sterile numbers that the HCAHPS produces.”

There it is—stories! Because great stories come from great experiences.

We believe that successful healthcare marketing starts and ends with patients. And we believe patients want to hear from other patients, not self-congratulatory messages from boastful healthcare institutions and physicians.

Telling a Story
Let’s face it: Marketing and communication has always been about telling stories. What has changed is who is telling those stories—and who is listening.

Successful storytelling starts with sourcing compelling stories and finding patients who are comfortable sharing not only what they went through, but more importantly how they felt going through the process.

One place to look to see how storytelling has changed us as consumers is at our entertainment-obsessed society, where some of the loudest buzz (and engagement!) comes from reality shows, crowdsourcing and user-generated content. Consider how many people have eschewed traditional media channels, like broadcast and cable TV, and cozy up to YouTube for their entertainment. In fact, YouTube contends as a leading source of discovering and listening to music (not just music videos!) for younger audiences.

Why Stories Matter
In healthcare marketing and communications, the traditional focus has been on new technologies and treatment procedures, creating indistinguishable “white noise” in the mind of the healthcare consumer.

The result for many is confusion, because consumers can’t really judge what is best, in part because they don’t know the difference between a 64-slice or 360-slice MRI (other than bigger is always better, right?) and the technology changes and improves so frequently. There is also an expectation that the hospital and physicians we choose will have access to the latest technology, making determining “differentiators of choice” more difficult to find.

That’s where the power of real stories, from real patients, makes a real difference. An exceptional experience is something that all patients can understand—and it’s something they want for themselves.

Approaches that use real patients and real stories are viewed as more credible in the eyes of others. This is supported by research and data—word-of-mouth and personal experiences trump slickly produced and “me, too” technology messaging.

People follow the recommendations of people they know and, most importantly, people they believe. And nothing is more compelling than listening to a real story by a real patient.

We all want our stories to resonate. And stories told by patients, for patients, resonate on a level that traditional messaging can never achieve. It’s about making a connection, on both an emotional and rational level, with your intended audience.

Patients need to see themselves as part of your
Listen—and Then Hear

Listening is critical in developing effective marketing and communication strategies that truly move people to make a decision. Start by talking to your patients and listening to their stories. And don’t just listen; really hear what they are saying.

Dig deep into what motivates patients to select a hospital or doctor or make a decision to select one type of procedure over another. Oftentimes it is someone’s gut feeling, corroborated by the experiences of others that will help push someone from prospect to patient.

It may be a dirty word, but you are now “selling” to extremely discerning and finicky consumers. They demand to be acknowledged and treated as the most essential part of the healthcare team.

So pass the megaphone to your patients and let them tell their stories about you and you will soon find new patients who will wish to share the same experience of those “patients like me.”

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Listening to the Crowd

One of the biggest trends we see is crowdsourcing. Think of it as the successor to what we used to call “group-think”—and it is rampant throughout society, including how people make decisions on their healthcare.

Thinking back to our New Hampshire focus group, the participants were more interested in hearing from “patients like me” than from the vaunted institutions themselves. It is that free form discussion, seasoned liberally with objectivity and transparency that is most inviting to many people.

But we often err on the side of scripting. We know that succeeding in healthcare, especially at the highest levels of medicine, requires years and years of training, experience performing intricate procedures and access to the latest and greatest technology, equipment and facilities. In short, those who deliver the care are super qualified and usually eager to share their knowledge.

But that enthusiasm, often unintentionally blended with a good dose of hubris, usually leads to lecturing.

The better approach is explaining, but not from your perspective—rather from other patients who have already experienced your amazing doctors, your incredible dedication to care and your supersophisticated technology.

Let patients do the talking for you—you have already earned their trust, respect and admiration. Now watch them evangelize!