

Promotional Healing for the Health Care Industry – Promotional Healthcare Products



By Karen Akers

With skyrocketing costs and difficulty finding – and keeping – qualified employees, the health care industry isn't exactly in the pink. But creative marketing with a variety of promotional healthcare products could be just what the doctor ordered. Trust us, you'll feel better and it won't hurt a bit!

As a nation, we're not getting any younger. In 2000, there were an estimated 35 million people aged 65 or older in the U.S.; by 2030, that number is expected to rise to 70 million, or about 20% of the American population. Compare that to 1900, when the 3 million people over the age of 65 made up just 4% of the population, and you see the definite shift toward modern maturity.

It should come as no surprise, then, that those 85 and older make up the fastest growing segment of the population. Consider this: People over 65 spent about 60% more on health care in 2000 than people under 65. It makes sense. Older people stay longer in hospitals (6.4 days vs. 4.6 days) and have almost twice as much contact with physicians (7 visits per year vs. 3.7 per year for those under 65). Put that together with a burgeoning elderly population and it's easy to see how the demands on the health care system (and the marketing opportunities this affords) will continue to increase. Business can take advantage of this trend with promotional healthcare products.

Remedy Ailing Interest

And it's not just the market itself. Growing demand within the health care industry also means more employees to meet that demand. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimated that health care employees made up about 9% of the nation's workforce – more than 11.4 million

workers – in 2001. By 2010, BLS expects that number to grow to 13.8 million. In fact, two health care-related industries, “residential care” and “health services, not elsewhere classified,” rank in BLS’s top three industries with the fastest projected employment growth through 2010.

Still, while the demand for various classes of health care workers will continue to grow, the supply of qualified individuals to fill these positions may be declining. Some experts predict a real shortage in physicians and registered nurses in coming years, which could increase competition among potential employers.

So how does this affect your promotions? A greater need for recruiting and rewards programs, along with general employee recognition, is an obvious place to start.

One hospital, for example, was trying to find more volunteers, but it had a limited budget for promotions. It worked with a promotional consultant, who came up with this: A program around the theme, “grow as a volunteer,” using packets of flower seeds imprinted with that message to convey the point. “It was kind of a nontraditional item – people loved it,” says Kristine Beaton, the hospital’s consultant.

And don’t forget about uniforms and other accessories. There’s a variety of medical-related wearables and accessories available through your promotional consultant, from scrubs and lab coats to tote bags and lanyards – all sorts of items bought by (or for) employees to build loyalty and morale.

For companies that provide home health care services, outfitting employees in logoed apparel can give them a more professional – and therefore more trustworthy – appearance. “We do everything from wearables programs for the staff to shirts for company drivers and smocks for people to wear in patients’ homes to the totebags they’re carrying,” says promotional consultant Joe Winston, who has a large number of clients in the health care industry. “The tote bags are mesh so that when [caregivers] go in and leave, [patients] can see what’s in the bag. A lot of people don’t want strangers in the house because they’re afraid they’ll [steal] things, so mesh tote bags are always a real big thing that we do.”

Out & About

Of course, a good portion of the health care market’s promotional spending is directed outward rather than inward. Most hospitals, clinics, family practices, dentists, long-term care facilities and other medical organizations spend a lot of time and effort maintaining a positive image in the local community. And they approach this task in a variety of ways. From general information sent via direct mail to health fairs or screenings for specific conditions, these institutions want to make sure people think of them first when a need arises. Here are some possible programs to consider:

Potential patients. Many organizations market to people who are new to a neighborhood. Dentists, family doctors and hospitals can send out magnets, stressballs, first-aid kits or other

items as part of a neighborhood welcome pack, or they can raise awareness with new residents through direct-mail campaigns designed with your promotional consultant.

Beaton helped a hospital in Iowa reach out to new residents. “They were trying to target an audience of people who had just moved into their community in the hopes that they would choose a clinic and a physician connected with the hospital,” she explains.

The hospital had been sending out a response card with little success. By adding the incentive of a promotional product for filling out the card, the hospital saw interest grow significantly. They focused the promotion around the concept of time, choosing a robotic alarm clock/calculator to carry the message. “The theme of time – that it’s time to choose a physician – created a sense of urgency so people would make that call and take care of their health,” Beaton says. The hospital saw its response rate increase from 4% to roughly 11% within a few months. Since the promotion, it has remained steady at around 14%.

Community care. Health organizations can also cultivate community interest by maintaining a presence at various events. They’re natural sponsors for health walks, charity functions and general community affairs. Even sports teams – from little league to the pros – can be a great way to get your name out. “A hospital might sponsor a 10K run or a night at the ballpark where they could hand out visors and it would be ‘eye care night’ at the game,” Beaton says. “We’ve used small tubes of sunscreen for various events in the community, such as parades or for health fests where people are going to be talking about skin cancer.”

Health care organizations can also use wearables and other imprinted items to accentuate their presence at an event. “We offer corporate apparel and branded merchandise for staff and volunteers,” says promotional consultant Jeff Hall. “Many of these items are used for employee recognition and team building, as well as public relations programs where the hospital is participating in community events.”

Centers of attention. Open houses and guided tours give hospitals and clinics the opportunity to introduce themselves to the public. When a medical center was getting ready to open its new cardiac care facility, it worked with Winston to inform the public and medical community about the new facility. First, it emphasized the “heart” theme by scheduling the first wave of the promotion around Valentine’s Day, about two months before the center was scheduled to open.

A custom CD was created to reflect the theme and give recipients a good first impression. Titled *Songs From Our Heart*, it featured oldies songs that used the word “heart” and contained information about the new center. The CD was sent out to 5,000 members of the medical community, people in local neighborhoods and the media. “It was in anticipation of opening the medical center two months later,” Winston says. “The purpose was to get the word out, and it was really well received.”

When it was time for the center’s grand opening, Winston carried through with the theme it had created months earlier, using several different types of heart-themed products for the grand-

opening event, including favors and crystal hearts inscribed with the facility's name that were given to the doctors.

Building trust. Promotional products are also a good way to show appreciation and solidify relationships with current and former patients. Hospitals can give all sorts of baby accessories to new parents. Other new patients might receive logoed hand lotion. Pediatricians can distribute growth charts and lip balm and sunscreen in funky colors to young patients. And old standbys like magnets, pens/pencils, mugs, daily pill dispensers, etc., can keep your name where patients are likely to see it.

“My home health care client uses plush toys to comfort sick children and [bridge] the gap between the sick child and the nurse/practitioner,” says promotional consultant Julie Woodall. “They also use business-card magnets to keep their number handy in case of emergencies and purse/pocket hand sanitizer as a leave-behind to promote good health habits.”

Private practices can use products to create a specific atmosphere. Products as small as stickers can be used by dentists to reward children's good behavior; logoed toothbrushes can be given to all patients to create a positive, lasting impression. Custom scrubs or other accessories featuring cartoon characters can make a pediatrician and her staff less intimidating to young patients.

The Need To Network

Vendors, manufacturers, equipment suppliers, home-care organizations and long-term care facilities are just a few of the groups that can use promotional campaigns to attract and retain business from other medical institutions.

Example: Long-term, home-care and rehabilitation organizations rely heavily on referrals from doctors and hospitals. Some patients and their families put a lot of stock in practitioners' recommendations when extended care is needed, so it's important for these businesses to project a positive image to the referrers.

“Their goal is to get the people in the hospitals to refer them,” says Winston. “So when they meet caseworkers, they give them items with their company logo on it – everything from file folios, padfolios, even miniature Etch-A-Sketch keychains. People just get a kick out of those things.”

There are also equipment manufacturers, product suppliers and others who need to promote themselves to companies that buy their products and services. Recently, there's been a trend toward several hospitals banding together to buy medical products at cheaper prices or share expensive equipment. Like every other business, medical centers are looking to cut costs in today's competitive environment, and they're learning that working together can sometimes accomplish that.

“Communities that can't necessarily afford installing, let's say, an MRI machine at the hospital are working with a company that has a mobile diagnostic piece of equipment, a shared resource

among hospitals,” Beaton explains. “The service providers’ target audience is either hospital administrators or purchasers who are under very much pressure to keep health care costs down for the hospital. So they look for items that can stay on desks like memo holders, magnets, staplers, note cubes – things like that.”

Also try personalized candles, promotional lotion, custom bath sets, and custom soap from True Uniform & Promotional Supply.

Once Again, It’s Who You Know

In a system so reliant on referrals and references, it’s not surprising that a lot of business in the health care industry is earned through good experiences and word-of-mouth.

“In a hospital, it tends to radiate out from the marketing or public relations department,” notes Beaton. “Some departments have budgets and are allowed to do their own purchasing, but they have to run it by the marketing department for the branding perspective. I’ll work with the volunteer coordinator who’s trying to attract new volunteers, or directly with the administrator of the hospital in getting either gifts or awards for physicians. A lot of times, they have clinics coordinators who work directly with the clinics that are tied in with the hospital.”

By taking the time to talk with your promotional consultant about the vast marketing options available to the health care market, you’ll open up a world of business opportunities. “You have to have a plan – work with your consultant to define your goals and who you’re targeting,” Winston says. “That’s going to mean results for you.”

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