

Marketing 101:

IF YOU CAN'T FIX IT, FEATURE IT

By Moshe Engelberg, PhD, MPH

If you can't fix it, feature it. This is one of the most powerful marketing axioms I know. In 15 years of consulting with a broad array of health organizations, I have relied on this "outside the box" idea perhaps more than any other.

The underlying principle is simple and powerful: What you may treat as a "negative" — a liability — may in fact be your greatest asset. Instead of hiding it or trying to change it, lead with it. Don't hide from the truth, which is usually what your patients and target audiences think about. Disarm the negative perceptions by putting them on the table, front and center. In other words, if you can't fix these differences, feature them.

For example, you know that for most patients, colonoscopy preps will be uncomfortable, as will prostrate exams and pelvic exams, and that waiting for lab results to come back can be very anxiety-producing. So don't ignore it. Acknowledge the discomfort explicitly and show how your practice helps patients manage the downside through friendly staff, ample support, and 24/7 availability through e-mail.

Whether you're in solo practice, affiliated with a group or university, or part of a large healthcare system, nothing is more important to your marketing success than the things that make you different. Your differences make you unique. Often, the qualities that make you different are your greatest gifts. As we discussed in July's article, using your gifts and focusing on what you do best are essential components to being on your path of greatness. But before getting into featuring what you can't fix (what is often "hidden"), it is critical to understand why differences are so important for effective healthcare marketing.

The Power of Different

Marketing is first and foremost a way of thinking. One of the most important mission-critical concepts in marketing thinking is "differentiation." For you as physicians, differentiation is a means of distinctively standing out in a crowded marketplace of providers in order to do what you do best while achieving financial success.

Some companies call it their "differential competitive advantage." Salespeople call it USP: Unique Selling Proposition. Modern therapists call it the key to your full potential. Loving grandmothers call it what makes you special. I call it the Power of Different.

The Power of Different enables you to create a

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unique niche or "sweet spot" in the mind and hearts of your target audiences: patients, payors, partners, policymakers, etc. Your point of differentiation will lead you to a positioning strategy. No matter what kind of health services you provide, a salient positioning strategy is essential.

Know Thyself

You must understand the strengths and weaknesses of your organization or offerings versus those of your competition in order to identify points of differentiation and develop the optimal positioning strategy. In what ways is your offering comparable to your competition's, and in what ways is it different? Create a grid (see Table 1) and list comparative advantages and disadvantages as you and your staff see it from an internal perspective and from an external perspective as revealed by research of your target market(s).

Table 1. Identifying Potential Points of Differentiation

	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
INTERNAL PERCEPTIONS		
EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS		

Take a hard look at what you perceive as your "weaknesses." As counterintuitive as it may seem, these perceived liabilities — your location, the long waits — may actually be your most powerful points of differentiation and are often what people think about you anyway. Which brings us to the essence of this article: If you can't fix it, feature it!

Beyond "Fixing" to Featuring!

A common problem is that the characteristics that are presumed to be liabilities are often swept under the rug without real consideration of their positive value.

To avoid this premature rejection of potential assets, first identify them. Ask yourself: "What about my company (or myself) am I embarrassed about? What don't I want people to know?" There may be substantial marketing value in what you currently hide or ignore.

There are examples of how this axiom of IYC-FIFI (we need another acronym in healthcare, right?) has been successfully applied in many sectors of society, including healthcare. I'll never forget the "if you can't fix it, feature it" story I heard from physician-author Dr. Ken Pelletier years ago. He invited his stress management workshop participants — "Type A" executives — to let go of their competitiveness in order to reduce their stress levels. He tried and tried, but it just did not work. Finally, he decided to "feature" the problem. What did he do? He had his Type A executives compete to see who could relax most quickly.

With an open mind and creative marketing

thinking, you can identify "weaknesses" that may really be strengths. For example, if your practice is in a hard-to-find location, don't pretend it's easy or otherwise mask the reality. Instead lead with the truth: Worth the search. Good doctors are hard to find. And so on. Get the picture? If your patients need to put up with long wait times because you spend the time you need with patients, don't hide it. Feature it as a powerful point of distinction.

A classic example of a company that succeeded by featuring what most others would have hidden or tried to fix is Smuckers. Most of us associate the name Smuckers with jams and jellies — that's good brand awareness. Imagine the lively conversations in the Smucker home. The family patriarch insisting that a family recipe worthy of being passed on through generations of Swiss Schmuckers (they did slightly change the name after emigrating to America) absolutely needs to honor the family name. Younger family members terrified of what may result from branding their products in modern America with a name like Smuckers. Then the Smucker with the marketing mindset resolves the conflict by saying "if you can't fix it, feature it!" and goes on to create the powerful slogan that still makes their brand stand out (and that many of us can quote): "With a name like Smuckers, it has to be good." Though slightly tongue in cheek, the Smucker example is a prime illustration of taking what was a problem and turning it right side up. I think we in healthcare have a lot to learn from that.

Another example from the corporate world: Oldsmobile. They identified that their target customers perceived Oldsmobile as old-fashioned, something they remember dad driving. What did Oldsmobile do? Featured this perception head on, in their "Not Your Father's Oldsmobile" campaign.

Can any "liability" be featured and turned into an asset? Clearly not. As guidance, a corollary axiom to "if you can't fix it, feature it" is this: "The best way to kill a bad product is to market it." Ethical wrongdoing, poor diagnostic skills, or inaccurate billing practices are simply bad and have no place in marketing. These inherent negatives aside, there may be times when even good things elicit such strong negative perceptions that they ought not go be featured. For example, I've heard the story from some physician colleagues of a generous philanthropist in Texas who bequeathed a gift to his community hospital worthy of naming the hospital after his family. How the hospital fundraisers and the donor, Mr. Deadman, resolved this issue, I have yet to hear.

Every organization has its points of distinction that provide value to its customers. Find yours. Look at what you believe are your weaknesses from a fresh marketing perspective. And if you can't fix it, feature it! ☀