

All About Us: The Classic Physician Marketing Blunder

By Moshe Engelberg, PhD, MPH

Let me tell you all about ... me, my practice, my training, my products and services, my organization, on and on ad infinitum. Does this sound familiar? We all want to talk about ourselves. We all want to be heard and to count. That's human nature. But it's bad marketing. It cheats you and it cheats those you want to reach.

The crux of the problem is our penchant for talking about "us." When we focus on "us," we focus on our features, that is, our people, our processes, and the things we do. As a result, we neglect to focus on "them" and the benefits that our work produces for them. It is the benefits — the results we generate — that matters to our target audiences, whether patients, partners or payers. Think of it this way: Features = Description. Benefits = Satisfaction. For example, the features of a smoking cessation clinic may include an initial medical exam, twelve, one-hour sessions facilitated by a licensed professional, a list of topics such as motivations for starting to smoke through relapse prevention, nicotine patches, etc. All descriptions of the services being offered and important to convey at some point, but not very persuasive. Why? Because we're not telling the customer what's in it for them. We're not conveying the benefits or satisfaction our services promise. Most importantly, we're not communicating how these features will help them quit and stay quit. Which is precisely what they want to know.

From a marketing perspective, everything about your organization or practice "talks" — how your phones are answered, your signage, your brochures, your invoices, and especially how you and your staff treat patients. To assess what you are saying, do a quick and honest critique of your promotional materials and website. How much of the information describes the features of your organization and your services? Probably most. How much describes the benefits and value of your offerings in terms that are meaningful to the target audience? Typically not much. Is it clear why your "customers" should choose you?

Here's an organizational example: the San Diego Center for Patient Safety (SDCPS). Transitioning from a government grant-funded project into a permanent, broad-based, community-supported resource, SDCPS is working on avoiding the "about us" marketing curse. Its challenge is to move from being not very visible in the healthcare community to being a powerful force in accelerating safer healthcare for patients throughout the region. What is SDCPS's main feature (think description)? Developing regional, multi-institutional collaboratives to improve safety and quality. What is its main benefit? Ultimately, making San Diego County the safest place in America for patients to receive their healthcare. That's the vision. In developing SDCPS messages and materials, it's far too easy to go into "us" details, such as the process of collaboration and descriptions of the various collaboratives. Which is important information — at the right time. But

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just like nobody buys a drill because they want a drill (what they really want is holes so they can hang things, attach things, etc.), no one wants a collaborative just to have a collaborative. In this case, what healthcare organizations want is to accelerate their return on investment in patient safety. This translates into general benefits (think satisfaction) such as lives saved, money saved and enhanced reputation as well as more specific benefits, like accelerating acquisition of a safety culture, improving reputation for safety and quality, and providing legal protection via pooled data.

What benefits should be emphasized? Whichever matter to your target audience, to those you want to choose you. The way you find out is you ask. Simple idea, but often overlooked in the fast-paced, high-pressure lives of most physicians. And the more of an expert you are, the more important it is to ask because your perspective is even farther removed from your patients' point of view.

When you emphasize features, you are telling your customers that you care more about you than them. Consequently, customers say, "Who cares?" and tune out. When you focus on benefits, you are showing your customers you know what matters to them, and ideally that's what your services will deliver to them. As a result, they feel valued and important and will be much more likely to choose you, stay with you, and refer to you.

At its core, marketing is about an exchange — a "give" and a "get" — which when it works creates a good and lasting relationship. Focusing on "them" and knowing what benefits, what satisfaction is important to them makes what they "get," and thereby your value, obvious to them. This one change in how you think about your practice and how you communicate can set you apart and make it clear why you are worthy of their investment of time, money, and trust. If you still need to talk about you, call a good friend, hire a therapist, or count on "man's best friend." If you opt for the latter, just pet them while you talk so that they get the benefit they want too. ■

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