

PROMOTION STRATEGIES FOR HEALTH-CARE SERVICES

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The paper approaches the main promotion strategies used by companies that provide health-care services. The promotion represents all the efforts of an enterprise to positively influence the buyers' opinion regarding the products and/or services that are traded at a given time, this being its main objective. The strategies laid down in this paper refer to the services' quality, to the promotion of packages of health-care products and packages which target the employees. The closing of the paper makes a few recommendations that will surely contribute to a better functioning of the medical services at local and national level.

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The recent joining to the European Union imposes the necessity to revise/change the way health-care services are approached. These services must identify the real needs of the population and to elaborate certain programs to ensure for the population equitable access to health-care services. From this point of view, it is necessary to group and highlight the promotion strategies for health-care services.

The promotion represents all the efforts of an enterprise to positively influence the buyers' opinion regarding the products and/or services that are traded at a given time, this being its main objective. In the health-care department this means promoting health-care services of quality, which a company from this area puts at the disposal of the population.

The promotion is efficient when it has the power to create the desire to acquire the services provided by a company, with the help of its techniques. For health-care services offered by the population with the purpose to control and improve their physical, mental and social health, promotion is the process that gives the possibility to know the services offered by a firm working in the health-care department.

The promotion for health-care services must comply with the following conditions:

To supply information – a company providing health-care services must inform the population about its existence, about the services it provides and the benefits earned by a client as a result of purchasing a certain service. For example, in the case of a medical clinic endowed with a laboratory, when health problems are discovered for a patient, the clinic can add to the results of the medical tests a list with the main specialists from that area, and if the patient wants to get different opinions from more specialists from the same clinic, then he receives a discount.

To influence public behaviour – *designing information* campaigns about the negative consequences that tobacco, alcohol and prescription drugs consumption can have;

To remind - clients must be reminded about the advantages of purchasing the services offered by a medical clinic, in order to prevent them from changing their preferences;

Neutralizing unfavourable information – the measure is necessary for the cases when rumours with a negative impact over the clinic's image are launched;

Differentiating services – it occurs because of the existence on the market of many private clinics that provide to the potential clients similar packages of products. The content of these packages and their costs can't be known by the future clients, unless promotion campaigns are launched in order to attract the clients to a certain clinic.

To support an efficient promotion, a well defined communication system intervenes in order to help the health-care providing companies to achieve the marketing and general objectives. An efficient communication imposes the creation of a long-term relationship between client and company, creating the image of the organization which gets involved actively in the citizen's life, informing them about the fact the company honours its promises.

The promotion strategies for health-care services are based on the use of various communication channels. They can be grouped in two major categories: personal channels of communication and impersonal channels of communication.

The personal channels of communication imply a direct dialog between two or more persons. This type of communication can be achieved through the following methods: face to face communication; phone conversation; communicating by mail; communicating on an Internet forum.

The elements of direct communication for the health-care services' promotion can be illustrated as follows:

Face to face communication – the employees of the health-care provider offer information to the clients regarding the existence of a new headquarter, closer to the client's home, as well as the introduction of a new service;

Communicating by phone – the company's employees should phone clients to communicate them the possible changes or cancellations of their schedule; this type of communication is often used to facilitate the patients' appointments;

Communicating by mail – at the request of the client or of the family doctor, the firm can send the results of the medical investigations by mail, the company can also send brochures and pamphlets to family doctors;

Communicating on an Internet forum – the new services and the price changes can be announced through this channel.

The impersonal channels of communication are characterized by the possibility to send messages without a personal contact and without a personal communication. The main mass communication channels are included in this category, such as the printed media – newspapers, magazines; the broadcasting media – radio, television; the on-line media – e-mail, web sites. Advertising is a form of paid impersonal communication, which uses elements specific to mass communication with the purpose to send a message to a large, dispersed audience, with the intent to inform about the services provided by a company in the health-care department.

The advertising's objectives for health-care services are:

- informing the potential clients about the services the company provides;
- bringing awareness about the risks a person is subjected to when he or she is avoiding to go in time to the doctor;
- promoting additional services, such as going to the person's home for medical tests and/or giving medical treatments if the person can't go to the firm to receive it;
- promoting services of home care;
- informing the public about shows on various medical subjects;
- informing the public about the chance to do specialized investigations with state of the art equipment;
- informing the public about the chance to see specialists from the town of residence or especially brought to the clinic from all over the country;
- promoting discounts and/or gratuitousness for people with low incomes;

The most used forms of advertising in the health-care department are:

- Informative advertising – is recommended if the company introduces a new type of service on the market;
- Persuasive advertising – used to attract clients;
- Advertising to remind – used to keep alive the clients' interest;
- Advertising directed towards the professional and business environments – is used when the health-care providers want to sign a contract for the employees of a firm to benefit from certain services at regular periods of time;
- Advertising directed towards the consumers – is used if a network of health-care provider exists. The targeted client is the one who is informed about the services' separation within the network (the client is informed in which clinic belonging to the network he can receive services as IRM, pneumology, neurology, laboratory, etc);
- Depending on the size and importance of the health-care provider, advertising can have different levels of geographical spreading, from local to international advertising.

The advertising used by a firm in the health-care department is done with the help of the following communication channel:

- Newspapers – insure a good local level covering, but don't provide high quality in sending the messages;
- Magazines – cover a larger geographical area; the quality of colours, images and texts insure a bigger impact when reading the message;
- Television – through the combination of sound and motion it turns to the audience's senses;
- Radio – a passing exposure with a low level of attention;
- E-mail – a high control of the sent messages; a high degree of personalization;
- Web sites – on-line commercials on various sites or informing about discounts, events, forums.

The following types of strategies can be differentiated depending on the media channel, the tender and the market's structure:

The tender is taken into account when structuring the strategies depends on the way the product is approached. The strategic options are:

- the global product promotion strategy – of the medical services provided by health-care companies;
- the strategy to promote distinct components by using means and messages specific for each component – promoting each service provided by a health-care company.

The market's structure generates three types of strategic options: concentrated, differentiated and non-differentiated.

The concentrated strategy is used when the company chooses a market segment to address to through the content of the promotional messages and the mean to communicate is chosen. For example, determining the osteoporosis level for women over 45 years old.

The differentiated strategy implies choosing two or more market segments considered as being the target segments for which are chosen the most efficient means of communication and the adequate messages. For example, hypertensive clients, children, etc.

The non-differentiated strategy – is used when the company conceives a promotional strategy that targets the irregular market. Is specific for services or organizations belonging to a local geographical area (private practices).

Promotional environments – depending on the supply at the disposal of the population, the health-care providing company must choose the most adequate promotional environments in order to send its messages. The content of the sent message, the targeted clients, the tender determine, for all the promotional environments, three strategic alternatives: intensive, exclusive and selective.

The intensive promotion strategy is centred upon the use of all the promotional channels and means. It is met and recommended for companies with a large range of services in a highly divided market.

The exclusive promotion strategy requires choosing and using a single promotional channel. This strategy is rarely used and almost only for individual practices.

The selective strategy takes into account the selection and use of only that promotional mean which insures the best way to send the advertising message for every targeted market segment.

The personnel play an important role because they differentiate and position the health-care provider on the market. The personnel insure a permanent contact between the provided services and the clients' needs. Through their behaviour, the clients influence the coming-back rate, thus contributing to their loyalty to the company. Depending on the frequency of the personnel-clients contacts, the personnel's role in promoting the services is: permanent, periodical, occasional, arbitrary. These roles divide the health-care personnel in the following categories: contractors, changers, with influence, isolated.

The contractors – insure the permanent contact between the health-care provider and the clients; it is actually the most representative health-care service. In this category are included the medical personnel (doctors, nurses).

The changers – are a category that has a regular contact with the client and helps at running the service. This category includes the registry personnel, the laboratory and radiology employees, etc.

The personnel with influence – rarely make a contact with the clients, but contribute to the good functioning of the medical services. The management personnel from different levels are included here.

The isolated – are a category that doesn't have contact with the client, but insure the necessary support to provide the services. The supply, maintenance, cleaning, cooking, etc employees are included here.

From all the personnel categories mentioned above, the most important are the "contractors" (doctors, nurses) because their training level, their behaviour, fairness and promptitude determine the way a health-care service's quality is perceived by the client.

In order to provide quality services, the strategies regarding different personnel categories from the health-care department start with the recruitment, selection and hiring of the best employees and then permanently training them. The life long learning of the personnel is mandatory for all the practice levels: general practitioners, specialists from local, regional or national organizations, and is achieved through programs of sustained medical training (classes, conferences, seminars, etc). Unlike doctors, the nurses are the biggest group of persons who provide health-care services. This requires them to have qualifications which include the ethical, cultural and professional standards; the latter will be improved and developed continuously within programs of sustained training.

The motivation represents another strategy regarding the health-care personnel. It is necessary to have a complex personnel evaluation system, so that there is a fair correlation between the performance evaluation and the awarding system. This evaluation system must determine employees to be aware of and to assess for themselves their activity, this way they will be motivated to improve their performances.

Another aspect with major implications for health-care services are the work teams. The strategy regarding the forming of the group must take into consideration the roles played by each person, depending on the complexity of the provided service (the specialization and the number of surgeons, anaesthetists, nurses, etc).

As in any area, in the health-care department communication holds a major place at a formal and at an informal level, on the inside and on the outside of the company. That's why the strategy to stimulate communication must contribute to serving the company's interests and to inform correctly the potential clients. The firm's management is responsible to create a favourable climate for the employees, but is also responsible for the climate in the entire company. The positive answers given by the clients are closely related to the existent climate.

Recommendations:

To inform the public better, the family doctors should create a data base with the patients at the level of the private practice. These data bases must include all the information about the patients' medical history (blood type, allergies, tests' results, predispositions to diseases, existent illnesses, etc.). This data base should become national and be available to be accessed in case of emergency by doctors in hospitals and clinics or even by ER services. The patient should also have access to the data base.

To consider the patient's free time and to avoid lines, the health-care providers should create a communication system (electronic, through the Internet) in order to take up on the requests made by them regarding the appointments, the vacations of the family doctors, as well as sending to the patients the results of the investigations by e-mail.

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