

## Make Yours a Powerful Brand

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*Your “brand” is the culmination of everything people know about your urgent care center—the physical facility; appearance, friendliness and competence of the providers and staff; ease of use including short wait times and hassle-free processes; transparent and accurate billing; and ultimately, the value received in exchange for fees paid.*

### What is the “brand” of your urgent care center?

Some urgent care operators feel a need to get “creative” with their branding—coming up with an elegant name and intricate logo. Some others invest heavily into their physical plants—dramatic architecture, fine furnishings, and detailed finishes. While another group spares no expense in advertising—plastering their nameplate over billboards, radio/television, and even wrapped vehicles to “build a powerful brand.”

While such cash outlays certainly do contribute to a center’s “image” and may even drive visits early on, they can also leave an urgent care operator disappointed when they do not produce repeat visits and sustained profitability. Because unless such “investments” are combined with high quality medical care, a great patient experience, and attention to business details—they won’t make for a successful urgent care venture.

What makes a powerful brand? Ask many “marketing people” and they’ll tell you it’s the strength of the name, logo, spokesperson, imagery, and messaging—which typically manifest through advertising. But ask Starbucks, Nordstrom, Southwest Airlines or any other “leading” customer service company and you’ll learn it’s impossible to create a strong brand through anything that’s typically done under the guise of “branding.” Rather, a brand is ***always*** a reflection of four things:

- 1) The quality of your product or service;
- 2) The way you treat your customers;
- 3) The way you treat your employees; and
- 4) How well you manage your finances.

These elements are beyond the control of your advertising agency—they’re all about the service you deliver. In fact, there are many successful urgent care centers with somewhat modest facilities and relatively boring signage bearing two words only: “Urgent Care.” What sets them apart is their ability to capture word of mouth and repeat visits from a loyal clientele—through convenience, courteous service, and positive medical outcomes.

*USA Today* recently ran a story about the highest ranked customer service hotel in the nation—the Ritz-Carlton Chicago. Of course this is a luxury hotel, but it’s far from the most “fashionable” in Chicago. Instead of dramatic architecture, it occupies floors in a 34-year old high rise that also contains offices and apartments. The view from many rooms is straight into other office buildings. The unimpressive motor entrance is accessed through an alley. And the lobby and guest rooms—while clean, roomy, and elegant—are also somewhat dated with traditional textile patterns, boxy armoires, and dowdy fixtures. Sure it’s “nice enough” but if the criteria for the nation’s “best” hotel were location, architecture and the “trendiness” of interior design—this little known hotel wouldn’t make the ranking. The reason why guests return to the Ritz-Carlton Chicago is the service they receive from a staff who remembers and calls them by name, who anticipates their needs before they’ve spoken, and who are accountable for solving guest problems without bother or delay. Even after the hotel went through a major renovation of its physical facility, little changed because its brand had already been established upon *world-class* service.

The state motto of North Carolina is *esse quam videri*—“to be, rather than to seem.” But all too often in advertising, the practice is “to seem, rather than to be.” One of the textbook definitions of a “brand” is that it’s “a promise.” But until a brand is validated by actual consumer experiences, the role of marketing is to “fake it” by creating the illusion of a promise. An unknown brand, when marketed correctly, may be successful in drawing in first time patients to an urgent care center. But to keep those patients coming back—and telling others to do the same—the urgent care center must ultimately “make it” with a great product.

Can you name the automobile brand which commands only 2% of the U.S. market, the only brand to grow sales during the recent recession, and the brand whose buyers have more education on average than any other? It’s not Audi, Volvo or even Maserati. In fact you’ve probably never heard of the manufacturer—Fuji Heavy Industries. But mention the product—Subaru—to a Ph.D. graduate and odds are he or she can tell you it’s the only car maker in which every single model has attained a 5-star crash safety rating. You may also learn that the engine powering Subaru’s “All Wheel Drive”—developed in the 1960s—has sustained few changes since its initial design. And last, you might hear that Subaru retains more of its value in resale than any other car in its class. Subaru is certainly not a product with mass appeal but its brand is built solidly upon the “testimony” of generations of owners who have experienced its safety, durability, and affordability themselves—all without any pretense.

Clearly there is a role for branding—otherwise every product would be sold as generic and everyone would wear the same clothes and drive the same cars. The reason proven “brands” command a premium in the marketplace is they connote quality and consistency. So when branding your urgent care—yes think about the details of the name, logo, physical plant, and advertising messaging—but realize those details only define the brand insofar as they reflect the patient experience and quality and value of care delivered. Long-term success requires you “make it,” not “fake it.”

#### **Powerful Brands Appealing to a Consumer Niche:**



McDonald's is one of the world's most recognized brands—but its logo, signage, physical plant, and product mix are not particularly sophisticated. Rather, McDonald's is popular because it understands the values and tastes of its clientele and delivers a highly consistent experience. Every element of McDonald's operation has been documented and standardized across 30,000 restaurants serving 50,000,000 customers every single day.



What do college professors, ski patrol, and dog owners have in common? They are among the consumer segments targeted by Subaru. Subaru accounts for only 2% of U.S. auto sales but has captured a loyal following among highly educated consumers who desire a quality, safe, and flexible vehicle at a reasonable price without any pretense. Subaru not only has the highest owner loyalty rate, but it also has the highest resale value of any auto brand in the U.S. market today.



By focusing on personal service, the Chicago Ritz-Carlton Hotel has won the *Reader's Choice Award* from *Condé Nast Traveler* seven consecutive times. While this is a five-star hotel, the 34-year old facility lacks many of the attributes common to Chicago's luxury hotel scene. The Chicago Ritz-Carlton proves that dramatic facility isn't the key differentiator for a world-class hotel, rather—it's the service provided.