

Ten Activities for Marketing Your Urgent Care Center

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Having the newest facility, latest equipment and most experienced staff matters little if an urgent care center attracts an insufficient number of patients to turn a profit. Growing patient volume requires marketing. Many people confuse “marketing” and “advertising.” Although advertising is one component of a marketing plan, “marketing” is a more systematic approach that assures the urgent care center is positioned to meet consumer needs, consumers are aware the urgent care center exists, and consumers remember to use the center whenever they have a medical need.

The following ten activities support an urgent care center in developing a marketing plan and increasing patient visits:

1. UNDERSTAND WHO YOUR PROSPECTIVE PATIENTS ARE AND WHAT THEY WANT.

A business succeeds when it meets a consumer need better than alternatives. Marketing for urgent care starts by identifying a target group of patients and understanding their unmet medical needs. Urgent care patients are generally busy adults who need a place to go when a family medical need arises that requires immediate, but not emergency, medical attention. Typical consumer needs met by urgent care include:

- Availability during evenings and weekends (when primary care physician offices are closed).
- Convenience of non-scheduled walk-in service (to accommodate on-the-go lifestyles).
- Accessibility to home, school, or work (resulting in a short drive time to the center).
- Affordability (lower out-of-pocket cost than emergency rooms).

Patient needs may further include short wait times, confidence that a physician is board certified, a warm and inviting clinical environment, and a friendly and empathetic staff.

The best way to understand the needs of prospective patients is to ask—market research involves surveying, interviewing, or conducting focus groups to gain insights as to how patients utilize health care services, challenges they currently experience, and improvements they would like to see.

2. DEVELOP A STRATEGY TO MEET PATIENT NEEDS.

Health care needs vary by individual, meaning your urgent care center will likely not appeal to everyone. Some consumers have a strong brand affinity for the local hospital because it’s where they’ve always gone for care. For others, a shortage of Medicaid providers leads to no options but the emergency room. Consumers with high deductibles or co-pays tend to be more cost conscientious when selecting providers than those with first-dollar coverage. And in every city, there are physical and psychological boundaries such as rivers, freeways, and political lines that consumers do not feel comfortable crossing.

The center marketing strategy targets the patients most likely to utilize urgent care and builds the service offering around the needs of those patients by:

- Identifying which consumer segments the urgent care is going to target;
- Defining the value urgent care provides to those segments;
- Differentiating the urgent care from competitors (on factors important to each segment); and
- Creating a program to communicate the benefits and unique advantages of the center to each segment.

The target market for urgent care is typically working families with employer-provided health insurance, with active lives resulting in episodic injury and illness, and who place a premium on time and convenience. Urgent care consumers also tend to be “enlightened” as to alternatives for medical care, understand the cost differential versus emergency rooms, and see the quality of the patient experience and the quality of the care as one in the same.

3. COMMUNICATE PATIENT EXPECTATIONS TO YOUR STAFF.

Understanding the unmet health care needs of target consumers is the just the beginning—the urgent care center must then deliver a solution. Urgent care is a service business and thus, people are the primary product. Providers and staff must be aware of what consumers are looking for in an urgent care center and then consistently deliver on those expectations.

If the target market consists of busy professionals who place a premium on time—then the staff should make every effort to communicate wait times, streamline processes for operational efficiency, and make unavoidable waits more pleasant with amenities such as refreshments and periodicals. If the target market values the education and training of providers, then providers and staff should project a confident, professional aura in their appearance, clearly communicate diagnoses and treatment options, and take time to answer patient questions. Every aspect of the operation should be focused on meeting patient needs better than other health care options in the community.

4. IDENTIFY YOUR COMPETITION.

An urgent care center’s competition extends beyond other walk-in facilities and encompasses all of a patient’s options for basic health care. Potential competitors include primary care, after-hours pediatrics, hospital and freestanding emergency rooms, retail host model clinics, pure-play occupational health clinics, telemedicine, self-care with over-the-counter products, and even doing nothing at all. Understanding all of a patient’s options for care is a requisite to developing a service offering patients will value and creating messages that will bring patients through the door.

5. DEFINE YOUR CORE CAPABILITIES.

Creating “competitive advantage” entails meeting consumer needs better than competitors. A successful urgent care center will be differentiated from other health care options on factors that are important to consumers like:

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| --Location | --Operating Hours | --Wait Times |
| --Scope of Services | --Appearance of Facility | --Signage Visibility |
| --Participation in Health Plans | --Friendliness of Staff | --Affiliations/Referral Relationships |
| --Self-pay Pricing | --Accreditation/Certification | --Experience of Providers |

A competitive advantage chart provides a diagnostic tool that identifies strengths and weaknesses relative to competitors on each factor. Strengths make up a center’s value proposition while weaknesses become the focus of improvement.

Competitive Advantage Chart:

Core Capability	Value Proposition	Importance to Target Market	Urgent Care A	Urgent Care B	Hospital Emergency Room
Participation in Health Plans	Blue Cross/Blue Shield Accepted	10	Yes: \$35 co-pay	No: Cash at time of service, file out-of-network claim.	Yes: \$150 co-pay
Operating Hours	Evening Hours	9	Open until 9:00pm	Open until 6:00pm	Open 24 Hours
Operating Hours	Weekend Hours	9	Sat-Sun 9am to 9pm	Sat 10 am to 4pm; Closed Sunday	Open 24 Hours
One-Stop Shop	X-Ray On-Site	7	Yes: CR w/PACS	Yes: Film	Yes: Radiology Group (Separate Billing)
Affiliations/Referral Relationships	Relationship with Orthopedist	4	Yes: Same day referrals in the same office complex.	No: Refers to Hospital	Yes: Within Health System

6. BUILD YOUR BRAND.

A “brand” is the unique set of benefits a business delivers to a customer while “brand elements”—functional and emotional—are what differentiate a business in the minds of consumers. Ultimately, branding answers the question “why would someone use my center versus other options?”

For urgent care, “functional elements” are what a center does—such as suturing cuts and setting fractures—and the quality, price, and consistency by which it does them. All too often urgent care centers focus their branding on the functional elements. When educating consumers who are unfamiliar with urgent care—competing with the emergency room—functional elements

such as short wait times and low co-pays effectively define the urgent care brand. But when marketing to “enlightened” consumers and competing with other urgent care centers, walk-in service and on-site x-ray are not brand differentiators—the focus must shift to the emotional elements.

“Emotional elements” go to consumer perceptions and differentiate an urgent care according to the patient experience. When consumers do not have sufficient medical training to differentiate the quality of physician services, they make quality judgments based on what they can see and feel. A shoddy facility, long wait times, and an abrupt medical assistant will result in an evaluation that the doctor is of “poor quality,” regardless of the true quality of clinical services provided. But if the staff is friendly and warm, the waiting room comfortable and well attired, and wait times regularly communicated—the patient will be more likely to return and recommend the facility to others.

7. INCREASE PATIENT SATISFACTION.

Increasing patient satisfaction is the most important thing an urgent care center can do to assure repeat visits and word-of-mouth. Creating a positive experience involves evaluating all aspects of the patient encounter from the patient’s perspective—including the clarity of driving directions, the aesthetics of the physical facility, the amount and complexity of paperwork, and the appearance and attitude of the staff. Anything that could detract from the patient’s visit should be re-examined to assure the experience is one that patients will want to say good things about.

For more ideas on improving the patient experience, see “Putting Patients First: Redefining Quality in the Patient Experience” in the May, 2009 edition of the Journal of Urgent Care Medicine: <http://jucm.com/2009-may/practicemanagement.shtml>

8. EVALUATE AND PURCHASE PAID ADVERTISING.

While word-of-mouth is essential in building a positive reputation, it also takes time. For a growing urgent care needing to reach break-even volumes, the most effective way to let prospective patients know about the center is through paid advertising. Newspaper, radio, billboards, Yellow Pages, and direct mail targeted to the consumer segments most likely to use the center should communicate how the center meets consumers needs for convenient and affordable care.

Unlike restaurants, banks, and retail stores with daily utilization, urgent care medical needs arise on a fairly infrequent basis. A patient may be aware of an urgent care center and fully intend to use it but several months may pass until the patient has an actual medical need. Thus, key to success in urgent care advertising is *recall*—that the patient remembers the urgent care center when a need arises. In order for advertising to spur recall, consumers must be exposed to it on a frequent basis. Advertising during peak seasons and spreading the advertising budget across multiple media should maximize the number of times target consumers are exposed to the urgent care message when they have a need.

“Getting the Word Out: An Introduction to Urgent Care Advertising” is available in the March, 2009 edition of the Journal of Urgent Care Medicine: <http://jucm.com/2009-mar/practicemanagement.shtml>

9. ENGAGE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS.

Public relations (PR) provides exposure for an urgent care center by creating stories that are of interest to local media outlets. PR tactics include activities such as writing press releases about the center’s services and topics of health care interest, making providers available to reporters as a subject matter expert, writing letters to the editor, and participating in community organizations.

The point of PR is to raise awareness of the urgent care center as an innovative health care delivery channel and awareness of the urgent care doctor as an expert on medical affairs. When relationships are established with local reporters, they will likely interview the urgent care operator whenever a relevant story brews.

Not only is PR free of the expense of paid advertising but there is increased credibility to “objective” coverage by third-party media outlets. Sample topics of media interest include immunizations for seasonal and H1N1 flu, school and sports physicals, emergency room overcrowding, and health care accessibility and affordability.

10. DEVELOP AN INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY.

The Internet has quickly risen to become consumers' first source of health care information. An urgent care center should have a professionally created website that fully describes its location and capabilities. The website should be listed in online insurance and provider directories as well as in major Internet search engines. Once a web presence is established, traffic to the website and the center are driven by social media—including blogs, reviews and networking sites—that raise awareness among highly targeted consumer groups.

The Journal of Urgent Care Medicine recently ran a two-part series on Internet Marketing (July/August, 2009):

<http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/887494ea#/887494ea/30> and *Social Media (October, 2009):*

<http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/1249a329?page=2#/1249a329/34>.