

Marketing's Role in Facilities Planning

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When considering which organizational staff members should be involved in healthcare facility planning, marketing professionals are not the first to come to mind. But there are several key reasons why marketing staff should be involved to ensure thorough and successful facility planning processes.

Facility planning must be strategically driven to ensure that significant capital investments support the healthcare organization's strategic, programmatic, and financial goals. Facilities must also be planned around the needs of the population being served and the position the organization expects to achieve in the marketplace.

Marketing professionals can support these facility planning objectives in several ways. Marketing surveys and community assessments can help an organization identify health issues in the community and significant socioeconomic characteristics of different subpopulations in the service area. These findings can be used to develop or enhance services targeted to specific user groups.

Marketing staff involvement is particularly important when an ambulatory facility is being considered for off-site development. Marketing information can be used to develop services and facilities around the needs of a certain market segment such as perimenopausal women, the health and fitness-conscious professional, or the active senior market.

A market assessment completed for a multi hospital system in the Midwest showed the opportunity to develop several ambulatory facilities throughout the large metropolitan service area, with each facility tailored to the unique needs of the local population. One facility, to be located in a young, growing, family-oriented neighborhood, will provide services to mostly younger women and children. The facility can also be designed to accommodate related services and retail as well as play areas for children. Another facility will be located in an upwardly mobile, high-income professional community with

services oriented to the aging babyboomer population. Services may include cardiovascular fitness and testing, sports medicine, cancer screening and education, and exercise and health maintenance. For this market segment, an upscale, accessible yet high-tech image, convenience to the workplace, and amenities will be important.



Patient satisfaction and image and perception surveys conducted by the marketing department can also be used to help identify issues and concerns with existing facilities, including accessibility, image, amenities, and convenience. Dissatisfaction with the availability of parking is a frequent complaint of outpatients who must visit the hospital campus for services. Poor way finding (i.e., inadequate signage and visual clues to orient visitors and patients) or poor functional relationships between points of access to the building and services can lead to delays or long walking distances as patients and visitors try to find services.

Identifying patient service issues such as long wait times, congestion, and lack of privacy or comfort can point to underlying capacity constraints or poor facility configuration. In recent years, many emergency departments (EDs) have experienced an increase in ED visits resulting in overcrowding and longer

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wait times for treatment. Declines in patient satisfaction scores in some community hospitals have, in part, led to expanded or reconfigured facility projects in the ED to increase capacity, improve waiting space, better segregate certain patient populations (e.g., pediatric, psychiatric), and improve patient flow and departmental layout.

Physicians who get complaints from their patients about facility problems or who cannot get patients scheduled for a test or procedure in a timely way due to capacity constraints, will refer their patients elsewhere. Marketers can help assess the extent to which patients are being referred to other facilities by physicians on the medical staff because of facility issues. Some marketing departments have staff specifically assigned to meet with physicians and develop physician relations. This approach provides physicians with an opportunity to voice their concerns and for healthcare organizations to hear about a wide range of issues, including facility-related problems. A second method for soliciting physician input is through a written survey of the medical staff, which asks specific questions about the facility's capacity, attractiveness, location, and convenience.

A third source of information, if it is available, can identify specific tests or procedures that physicians routinely refer elsewhere. Some managed care payers provide a complete database of all the tests or procedures ordered by each capitated physician on the medical staff, including tests or procedures referred to other facilities. Significant loss of the potential patient volume to other facilities for services that could be provided locally may indicate problems with the service or the facility.

For one community hospital in the Northeast, marketing information from all three of the sources described above helped confirm the extent of lost referrals to the hospital's imaging department because of lack of capacity, long wait times for appointments, and facilities that are inconveniently located in the main hospital. The hospital recently

decided to develop additional imaging capacity in an off-site location that will be more accessible to patients.

Assisting in Facilities Development

Once it is determined that facility changes are needed, the marketing professional can assist in facilities development in a number of ways. If an organization is considering developing services off-site, marketing can help identify and evaluate potential sites by tracking patient origin data and determining significant geographic subregions that may support new ambulatory services. The site evaluation should include a complete competitor analysis, which may impact how, or to what extent, services should be developed. This analysis should include documentation of other providers of the service in the area and descriptions of the services they provide, including scope of services, size, operating hours, insurance accepted, attractiveness of the facility, location, and access to major traffic arteries.

Assessing the capabilities of competitors is an important function and can be done for inpatient as well as outpatient services. A survey of obstetric units at several competing hospitals helped one healthcare system redesign its services in order to meet or exceed the community standard for obstetric care. The survey also helped identify opportunities to develop triage and prenatal services and ambulatory facilities in a convenient and attractive way not offered elsewhere.

As facility concepts and potential renovation or new construction projects are developed, marketing can also work closely with fund raisers to help develop the materials needed to attract potential donors to the project. These activities can include brochure development, pictures, and coordination of architectural presentations.

The involvement of marketing professionals in facility planning can be extensive and undoubtedly their participation during the planning process not only improves facility design, but will help position the healthcare system for future success. ■