



Marketing Your Telehealth Program

A White Paper

Marketing Your Telehealth Program

Many Telehealth networks were built on a premise from the movie *Field of Dreams*: “If you build it, they will come.” Telehealth providers soon found that simply building a network wasn’t enough. Success required that networks not only be built, but that they be used as part of routine patient care and that prospective patients had to know that the network existed so that they could request specialty care be delivered to them from distant sites.

As with any project, Telehealth must not only be made available, it must be marketed. This white paper examines some ideas regarding marketing your Telehealth network. The suggestions are based on the author’s previous experience with marketing. It is important to bear in mind that the Telehealth marketing plan should be a part of your institution’s overall marketing plan. This paper will consider Telehealth specifically, and is intended to help you work with your marketing/outreach department to develop your message.

Answer These Questions First

Motivational speakers like to repeat the statement that, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there.” While the line is almost a cliché, it became so because of its accuracy.

If you don’t know how or where you are going to market your Telehealth program, your efforts (and marketing funds) could be wasted by either sending the wrong message to the right audience or the right message to the wrong audience. In order to better approach your prospective Telehealth patients and providers, you should answer the following questions:

- **To whom will we market?** Marketing must be targeted and carefully planned in order to be useful. While providing general information to the community could be effective in developing awareness of your Telehealth capabilities, targeting people who could most benefit from the services can go much further toward developing usage in those areas. This targeting should identify both external and internal audiences. Your employees need to know that Telehealth is available and that you encourage its use.
- **What will be our message?** Once you know who your prospective audience is, it’s necessary to develop the message that will attract them into your program. That message will be different for each patient group, specialty offered, remote site you serve, or could be generic to promote the Telehealth system. You will probably find that a combination of generic and specific messages will work best.
- **How will we reach our target audience?** If your target audience doesn’t read the newspaper, print ads would be a waste of time and money. If they don’t listen to radio, broadcast ads won’t perform as desired. You will need to know your audience and learn which medium is appropriate to gaining their attention.

- **What is our marketing budget?** There's a saying in the advertising industry that goes, "advertising doesn't cost; it pays." That's true as long as the advertising is properly targeted (proper audience selected), properly constructed (the right message), and properly distributed (the right medium), but those choices all depend on your market analysis and are constrained by your marketing budget. Your organization must set aside enough of a budget to reach the right people and do so economically and effectively. Without clear budget guidelines, your marketing efforts could underperform or "break the bank."

Once you have determined who your audience will be, you will need to determine how to reach them. The following paragraphs discuss various means of reaching prospective customers.

Media

Choosing the right medium to deliver your paid advertising and information is a critical step in getting your message out. You should take a close look at your target market and decide how they receive their information. Do they listen to radio? Watch television? Read the newspaper? Go online for their news? Choosing the medium that is most likely to bring the message to your prospective patients is a critical part of planning your marketing.

- **Print:** This white paper is being written on the premise that we are primarily speaking to Critical Access Hospitals which are relatively new to Telehealth (of course, these suggestions are valid for any marketing plan). With that in mind, we make certain assumptions, one of which is that there may well be a newspaper in your community, but no local magazine of general circulation. Print advertising in the hometown newspaper can be very effective for the right demographic.
- **Broadcast:** Radio and local television advertising can be effective if those outlets reach your target demographic. Placing your media on regional or even statewide broadcast outlets may dilute your message and impact your budget negatively. Broadcast stations have access to ratings services that spell out the demographics of their listeners or viewers and reviewing those demographics is an important step in preparing advertising and marketing expenditures
- **Social Media:** Internet-based media have grown rapidly in the last few years. Potential outlets include your website, and Social Media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Vimeo (to name only a few). These web-based outlets can be good ways to reach your target market economically. As with the other media, you must be sure your target demographic actually uses these outlets before you start to put your message out on them, but with little or no cost, they can be good ways to spread the word. It is also possible to purchase advertising on those media, and experimenting with a small number of inexpensive, targeted ads will give you a good feel for whether expanding into those markets with paid advertising is a good idea. Keep in mind, however, that it may be challenging to build up a base of 'friends' or 'followers' on some of these media and that the audience may not be a perfect fit for your marketing plan (of course, this is true with each of the media).

- **Personal contact:** This is especially helpful in small towns where ‘everybody knows everybody.’ Hospital or clinic staff can often find a welcome at community service organizations’ meetings, health fairs, community events or other community gatherings where information is shared. This personal touch not only helps disseminate information and enhance community relations, but it also confirms the facility’s interest in the community.
- **Sponsored events:** Perhaps your facility could sponsor a Grand Opening celebration for your Telehealth Suite, including an appearance via the network of your distal providers. You could invite people in to see the latest offering of Telehealth service in an already-established program. Perhaps something like a “World-class care with a local flavor” event could show off not only your Telehealth solutions, but also your newest local capabilities.
- **Direct marketing:** Used judiciously targeted mailings to a specific population segment can be an effective means of getting the word out. Should you choose to go that way, be sure that your pieces are eye-catching, meaningful and call for the recipient to take an action (“come and visit our new facility,” “Make an appointment today,” etc.). Image ads can work toward portraying your organization as a good neighbor in the community, but unless a significant portion of your advertising has a call to action, the image ads will not do much to expand Telehealth usage.
- **“Free” Advertising:** people new to business sometimes feel that the best way to get their message out is to rely on broadcast outlets and newspapers to air free Public Service Announcements (PSAs). First, be aware that newspapers are not required to provide PSAs: only broadcast outlets that use the public airwaves are so required. Further, while broadcast outlets are required to run PSAs, they determine which announcements they will run. The best way to get ‘free’ advertising is to enter into paid advertising contracts and use the contract as leverage for PSAs. Newspapers, while they are not required to offer free advertising are often looking stories of general interest to the community and may be very open to covering special events, new developments and other interesting stories coming from your organization.
- A word about **word-of-mouth:** As with “free” advertising, business people who are just starting a new venture often say they will make exclusive use of word-of-mouth (WOM) advertising. Unfortunately, with WOM, the advertiser has no way of controlling the message or targeting the recipient of those messages. Consider the parlor game where a message is whispered from person to person and the last message is often far different from the initial message. Second, dissemination of the message is slow as it goes from one person to the next. WOM can be helpful, but it’s much better to share the right message and reach the right group at the right time through a marketing strategy you control. WOM has changed from extremely ineffective in the pre-computer days; it now sometimes works. Testimonials, user reviews and ‘thumbs up’ clicks can offer good insight into your services for prospective patients. Just keep in mind that there are still challenges to word-of-mouth advertising, including the possibility that negative comments could be spread faster than positive ones.

The Message

As you determine the best outlet for your messages, you will need to decide what your message for your target audience should be. That will be determined when you ascertain what your audience wants and needs to know. For instance:

- If a significant portion of your patients are chronically ill, you may want to emphasize that you can offer care for their conditions, help them avoid travel challenges and the associated expenses and help them avoid unnecessary hospital readmissions or emergency room visits by seeing their distal specialists in your facility via your Telehealth network.
- If your community has a large tech-savvy population, you may want to accent the ‘gee whiz’ nature of Telehealth and how technology can facilitate their care.
- If you offer intensive care or emergency care supervised by physicians in remote hospitals, you might want to share the idea that in a difficult situation, local care can be provided in most cases, and the patient can frequently receive follow-up care in your hospital rather than separated from family and friends because of a transfer.
- Depending on the specialty care you offer, your message can target patients and their families who need that type of care to let them know that they no longer have to go out of town to receive the medical services they need.
- At community functions, your speakers can accent that the hospital started using Telehealth because of their deep concern for the community and their sense of obligation to provide the right care at the right time, ‘right at home.’
- At business-oriented community service clubs, you might want to deliver a message showing that money that previously went out of the area for specialty care and its attendant travel expenses is now being held inside the community and therefore helping local businesses realize the benefits.
- One powerful message is the personal story. If you have a local citizen who was significantly helped by your Telehealth service, you could use his/her story as a significant endorsement of the program. After securing appropriate releases and making clear what information would be released and what would be protected, you can have the former patient give a few sentences about the value of Telehealth for his/her situation. These testimonials can be relayed to the audience through print advertising, feature stories, broadcast advertising (audio and video) and captured as videos to post on your hospital’s website.
- Tie-ins to national events. Is there something in the national news that relates to a service you provide via Telehealth? An ad or a call to your local newspaper editor might just allow for a tie-in. If it’s National Heart Month and you offer cardiac care via Telehealth, you have a great tie between your service and national events. The events needn’t be national. If the governor or the mayor proclaims a special observance or ‘week,’ that’s a perfect tie-in to promote a related Telehealth service you routinely provide.

Using the Media

Once you've decided on a medium for your message and the content of that message, there are a few other pointers that will help you reach your prospective patients effectively:

- Show, don't tell: use images and text that illustrate your message (showing). Let your audience feel and sense the situation, rather than simply giving them a long list of symptoms and treatments (telling).
- Use a conversational style, not an academic one: People want to get the information they need when they need it as fast as possible. While academic writing style may be more thorough, it's important to remember that a litany of details is not as important in advertising as is getting the key information across in as few words as possible. Be concise, be active and be honest.
- Answer questions or offer solutions to problems your target audience might face: Some advertisers make the mistake of telling the prospect how wonderful their business is rather than showing the prospect how the business can help them meet their personal needs.
- Be consistent: If you intend to put out press releases on the first day of each month, do so. If you're going to run a quarter-page ad in the newspaper every other week, make sure it happens. If you're going to post on your social media site once a day, do it. If you commit to a schedule, stay with it. Readers want to see consistency from an advertiser for a number of reasons, not the least of which is to see that they're reliable and if they follow up on their commitments (a significant concern in healthcare). There's another reason that is just as important, however, your target audience may miss the first piece, glance at it and move on or not even use the medium you choose that day. Consistent placement of marketing ensures that you will make as many contacts among your target audience as possible and will get your message out frequently. Repetition is critical in advertising.

This brief white paper has been designed to offer the reader some insights into how and where to promote a Telehealth service. We encourage you to collaborate with your Marketing Department to develop a plan to provide your community with information about the availability of Telehealth care in your community.

And, of course, NRTRC is always available to discuss issues, answer questions or offer information. Simply drop us a line and we'll do what we can to help you grow your Telehealth system.