



Direct Marketing 'Hits Home'

Direct mail and telemarketing, when used jointly in a well-planned marketing program, can be powerful tools for maintaining high occupancy rates.

THE DECISION TO MOVE TO A long term care facility—or to move a loved one there—is highly personal, and marketing of such facilities must be personalized as well. That's why broad-based advertising techniques like print media or radio ads will rarely hit home as effectively as a direct appeal to a prospective patient or family member can. In addition, ads alone will not draw most prospective patients, responsible parties, or referral sources to visit a facility in person, which is often the most important first step in generating a lead and filling a bed or unit.

Direct marketing—"narrow-casting" as opposed to "broadcasting"—is a far more personal approach that is better suited for drawing prospective clients into the facility to experience it first-hand. One proven technique is the use of direct mail and telemarketing (out-reach) to capture attention. It is vital to include a direct-response mechanism for such promotional communications. People must have the opportunity to act by calling the facility, setting up a tour, or attending onsite presentations such as openings, seminars, or other special events (in-reach).

For example, facilities can host free educational seminars on topics of interest to seniors and can incorporate a speaker from the facility following the keynote speech. Another approach to "in-reach" is to offer a free gift, coffee-and-tea hour, or lunch or dinner at the facility in exchange for a sales appointment and tour.

Some facilities also choose to schedule outreach presentations by holding

off-site consumer-education programs in conjunction with community organizations and entities that hold regularly scheduled meetings such as councils on aging, golden age clubs, retiree groups, medical society auxiliaries, Lions Clubs, or garden clubs.

Reaching out to the community with direct marketing efforts requires getting to know the target geographical market. Before launching a successful direct marketing campaign, a facility needs to research some basic information about the target market, including the general lay of the land; the age, income, and assets of prospective clients; and the demographic characteristics of existing patients (if any) and prospects.

Crafting The Message

Another vital step before sending out any type of direct marketing piece involves crafting an effective message. Sometimes, a research marketing firm can be helpful in analyzing why patients and prospects choose a specific facility over others in the region. One market-analysis technique is to hire a "mystery shopper"—a person playing the role of a prospective client—to visit and investigate competitive facilities. Another is to perform a literature analysis of the competition's marketing collateral pieces. Staff members can also be interviewed to determine what they consider to be the outstanding features and amenities at the facility. What makes it different from its competition?

Once a facility has clearly identified its products and services, targeted its

markets, and differentiated its products or services from the competition, it is necessary to choose the right marketing mix to get the message out.

While telemarketing has been abused, when employed properly the phone remains a powerful tool to reach out directly to prospective patients and their families. Telephone marketing can be used to set up admissions and sales appointments, invite prospects to free educational seminars, generate large turnouts to major events, and as a means of significantly increasing response rates to direct-mailing campaigns. And, on a per lead cost basis, the technique has shown itself to be highly cost-effective.

Before any phone calls are made or letters mailed, however, it is important to keep in mind the maxim that a "warm" contact is always better than a "cold" contact. An important first step to develop effective direct marketing and telemarketing lists is to work in-depth with existing patients and customers to acquire the names, addresses, and phone numbers of their friends and relatives. A newer or not-yet-established facility may want to find ways to link up with more established local entities that are well-known and trusted in the target market area. Lists of area seniors, or "responsible parties" (those in the age bracket who would be caring for aging seniors), can also be

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purchased according to zip code, age, and income information from mail list companies.

The Basics Of Direct Mail

Once a facility has identified its target market, carved out an identity and message, and focused on a program or approach to bring prospects into the facility, the next step is to develop and send out a carefully crafted direct mailing piece. Used alone, direct mailing pieces have a limited response success rate, from 0.5 percent to 2 percent, according to studies. But when followed up with a well-conceived telemarketing plan, the response rates can soar to as high as 10 percent or greater.

The facility will need to acquire and develop good mailing lists, and find a reliable fulfillment house to process the direct mail. It is always critical to

create opportunities for direct response to the direct mail piece. In addition, the time of year that the piece of mail is sent can make a difference. While January, February, and October are the best month for direct marketing campaigns, experts recommend avoiding August or December due to holidays and vacation scheduling.

Telemarketing, Follow-Up

Once a direct mailing piece has been sent, a call to the prospect who received it is no longer a “cold call,” but merely a follow-up to a friendly letter or invitation. And there are many ways to help ensure the success of that call. For starters, it is probably best to outsource mass telemarketing efforts to trained professionals and organizations, rather than risk burning out sales and admissions staff whose major job is obtaining admissions and sales commitments.

To get the best results, never “bargain-shop” for telemarketers by using students or minimum-wage employees, and steer clear of computer-generated calls, which are too impersonal. Instead employ mature, experienced individuals with a good working knowledge of long term care and seniors living products and services. Each time a campaign is conducted, the telemarketers will need to be retrained by sales and administrative staff to master the specifics of that particular campaign. It is always fruitful to monitor and make adjustments in the telemarketing “pitch,” script, and presentation as needed, especially during the first few days of each telemarketing campaign. And providers should be sure to follow up all positive responses with a card or another phone call.

Telemarketing follow-up should be launched within two to three days on either side of the direct mail distribution. Whenever possible, and if the budget permits, the provider should consider using newspaper and radio ads to support the direct-marketing campaign; the dollars spent will have

much more impact than if they were used on ads alone.

When a prospective client makes a commitment, the provider should confirm the commitment in writing and make a confirmation call the day or evening before the appointment, function, program, or event to affirm the person’s planned attendance. A successful direct marketing campaign can generate literally hundreds of leads. It is, therefore, critical to establish a system for management and control of the sales process so leads identified through direct marketing are not lost.

As leads are entered into the database, it is advisable to develop a queuing system for rating the best leads. The sales staff should be trained to evaluate the best leads every day and consider what can be done today, if anything, to close the sale. For best results, the sales director should create the habit of making at least 10 prospecting calls per day from the leads database.

At weekly sales meetings with the marketing team, the sales director should discuss how to motivate the best prospects on a case-by-case basis to select the facility or program. It’s important not to let getting more organized or developing a better system get in the way of prospecting or consistently making critical sales calls and follow-through.

One well-planned and well-executed direct marketing campaign can generate fantastic results. However, once the campaign is completed, it’s probably time for the provider to think about beginning to plan the next one. As in any other profession, it is never recommended to “rest on your laurels.” Leads generated today can mean sales, and a waiting list, tomorrow. ■

For More Information

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