

Marketing and the professions

Laurie Young explains why 'bedside manner' may be more important than technical competence.

It is a simple fact of life that everyone has to market themselves at some time; from the student applying to university, through the potential employee at interview to the seasoned professional seeking investment. Unfortunately, marketing has received a bad name from the likes of spin-doctors, unscrupulous multinationals and some sales people; and is frequently misunderstood. As a result, two important aspects of it, integrity and science, are a complete surprise to many.

The concept of 'product or brand integrity' means that the item, when used, delivers the promises that its image raises in people's minds. If a product or service does not deliver on its promises it will decline and fail. This is particularly true of professional services, whether they are accountancy, law, architecture, or the various forms of healthcare.

Two particularly important success ingredients for professional practices are the technical excellence of the work and the quality of client service. They create a strong reputation (which may eventually turn into a brand) and this, in turn, draws in more work.

Any practice strategy (such as choosing a new partner or offering a new service) must therefore be aimed at enhancing or preserving the surgery's reputation. Marketing can be used as part of this emphasis, for instance to understand and manage the expectations of patients and ensure that the practice delivers against them. It is fundamental to the 'product

integrity' of the practice.

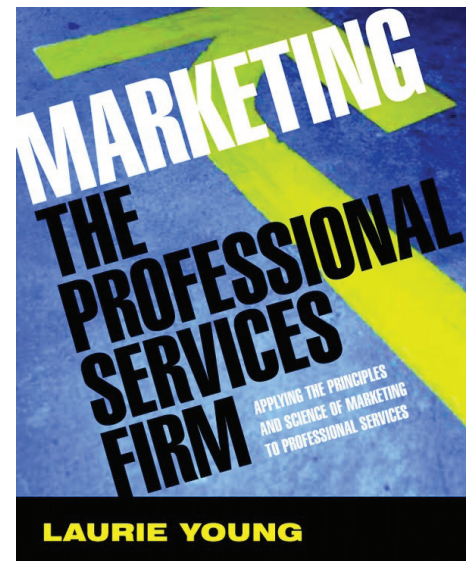
So what of marketing science? As with other specialties, marketing involves a wide range of concepts, techniques and processes. Properly used, these make an organisation more successful. Anyone can use common sense and experience to build their own house, to conduct their own legal defence or to manage their finances. Yet, they are likely to do it better if they use recognised approaches and rely on the advice of a professional. So it is with building an organisation. The right marketing expertise, added to common sense and business knowledge, can make the practice more successful.

There is intellect, experience and sophistication in growing a practice which is every bit as professional as the technical work that practitioners specialise in. Take client service, for example. First class professionals take pride in the way they engage with their clients and can be affronted when asked to consider how their service style might affect the health of their practice. Yet clients frequently judge the service they receive on different criteria from that of the provider and their priorities change or vary. Understanding the articulated and unarticulated service needs of different groups is a job in itself, for which

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a range of techniques are available.

It can be just as tricky to ensure that the professionals in a practice meet those needs. Whereas the practitioner might focus on technical expertise, the patient may value 'bedside manner' just as highly. In fact, the latter can cause patient to question the former if unsatisfactory. (One respected academic study found that, perhaps counter



● The role of reputation in generating work.

intuitively, the manner of interaction with doctors had more effect on people than technical competence). This is as much about setting policy and installing processes as any other aspect of sensible management.

Many professional practices, in both the public and private sectors, are grappling with dramatic changes resulting from the environment in which they operate. Their response will affect the earnings and success of everyone within their organisation. Modern service marketing comprises a range of approaches which are reliable and relevant to service organisations, whether commercial, public sector or charity. Properly used, they will grow a practice by enhancing patient satisfaction and creating opportunity. ■



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Laurie Young is a specialist in the marketing and selling of services, especially professional services. His latest book *Marketing the professional services firm; applying the principles and the science of marketing to the professions* is published by Wiley and is available from Amazon.