

MARKETING DONE RIGHT: A MICROPHONE, NOT A MEGAPHONE



Marketing is a powerful tool to connect with patients.

BY CRAWFORD IFLAND

Ah, *marketing*: one of the most misunderstood words in the English language. When uttered, it may evoke mental images of used car salesmen, flashy neon lights on the Vegas Strip, or even commercials featuring talkative camels.

But true marketing is much more than that. Marketing, if done correctly, is a powerful force that can help organizations engage with their customers in meaningful ways. It is about connecting emotionally with consumers—or rather, forming such a deep relationship with them that they cease to be just numbers on a spreadsheet and become deeply loyal proponents of your brand.

WHAT MARKETING IS NOT

Before we can understand what good marketing looks like, it is important to first understand what marketing is *not*. Let's dispel some rumors. *Marketing* is not a dirty word. It is not the used car salesman or the incessant TV commercials for mesothelioma settlements. Many people cringe when they hear that someone works in marketing—and understandably so; we have been conditioned to believe that all marketing is spammy and obtrusive. Nothing could be further from the truth. Good marketing is not harassment; it is relational.

That does not mean we need to limit marketing to telling feel-good, heartwarming stories. However, the stories we tell must connect with our audi-

ence on some level, and that is why all marketing must start with a story.

WHAT MARKETING IS

Seth Godin, one of the best-known marketers of our time, sums it up well when he says, "All marketers tell stories" (Figure 1). Good marketing starts with your story—not just what you do, but why you exist. These stories must be authentic, must be consistent, and must explain the *why*—the reason you get out of bed in the morning.

Rather than a megaphone used to yell at everyone who passes by, good marketing is a microphone. Good marketing doesn't just tell your story; it lends your customers a voice and

invites them to share stories of their own and become part of your story by doing so.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

First impressions are key because many customers make decisions and snap judgments with almost no data, and they generally stick to the instant conclusions they draw. It has been said that "you never get a second chance to make a first impression," and this is perhaps truer in marketing than anywhere else.

Marketers use many techniques to establish a good first impression: humor (Figure 2), suspense, and heartwarming stories, to name a few. Regardless of the approach, you must viscerally connect with your audience in an instant.

AUTHENTICITY

If a first impression is what gets your audience's attention and snap judgment, authenticity is what builds brand loyalty. Telling an authentic, coherent story across all touchpoints of your brand is the only way to build trust with your audience.

A key way to build customer trust that many marketers overlook? Doing the right thing. It doesn't feel like marketing, but it is a hugely important piece of retaining customers and building trust and camaraderie.

When a patient complains, address his or her concerns. When someone

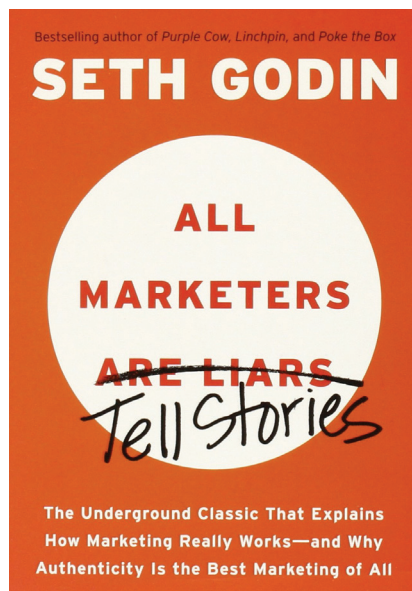


Figure 1. Good marketing starts with a story.



Figure 2. Humor and shock—some of the many tactics marketers use to get attention. Perhaps not appropriate in every situation, but it got your attention, didn't it?

leaves a negative review online, pick up the phone to give him or her an easier outlet to communicate those frustrations. Showing patients that you care about them and want to improve their experiences is just as important as communicating your surgical expertise or optimizing marketing channels. At the end of the day, your patients don't care how much you know if they don't know how much you care.

BELIEF SYSTEMS

There are three common ways to position a brand: (1) product attributes, (2) product benefits, and (3) product beliefs and values.

Product attributes. At the attribute level, there isn't much room for improvement, as any competitor can copy the attributes of your product. This is for commodities. No one diaper or paper towel can truly provide that much more benefit than the others—they all copy each other and use catchy phrases and cheap tricks (eg, *New and Improved!*) to get customers to open their wallets.

Product benefits. Product benefits offer slightly more leeway, as they focus on the desired advantage. It is no longer about what the product is but what the product does and what it can do for the customer. This is where most ophthalmologists stop.

It is not just about the fancy femtosecond laser but about the fact that it can help the elderly man see his grandson's tee-ball games again.

Product beliefs and values. The deepest and most effective way to position a brand is through product beliefs and values. Tesla is the perfect example of this. While some Tesla owners enjoy their cars just as much as the next person, a large subset *raves* about their cars. These Tesla owners are deeply committed to saving the environment and reducing their carbon footprint. Their custom license plates probably read "LOLWATT", "THXELON" or "CYA OPEC." If you meet one of these proud individuals at a cocktail party, you'll know.

Tesla has become a love mark—a product that evokes delight and inspires loyalty.



Figure 3. The Tesla brand has built a base of loyal customers with shared beliefs and values.

ality beyond reason. Love marks start with a mission and vision, a belief system about the world. Tesla starts with beliefs. They start with *why*.

HOW OPHTHALMOLOGY HAS GOTTEN MARKETING WRONG

Like it or not, most ophthalmologists tend to think marketing is all about optimizing ad spend, tailoring social media platforms, and boosting physician referrals and comanagement structures. Although these activities are important, there is much more to it than that.

When clients forget the most important, strategic aspects that comprise a good marketing plan in favor of the specific tactics, we like to call it *marketing myopia*. Marketing myopia—or focusing only on the story you want to tell rather than the story the patient needs to hear—must be the first issue addressed in the quest for effective marketing.

It is all too easy for ophthalmologists to be so enamored with the latest technology, the best surgical techniques, or tactics to get the most marketing bang for their buck that they forget the true reason they exist and the true selling point of their practices: to improve quality of life by restoring vision. That is why you get out of bed in the morning.

ANATOMY OF A GOOD MARKETING STRATEGY

To avoid marketing myopia and use smart marketing to your advantage, you must start by reframing your mindset about marketing. A basic marketing plan follows this framework:

1. Begin with an overarching story (why).

2. Develop a specific message about that story (how you do what you do).

3. Analyze the following factors (what): segmentation of your audience; differentiation of your product (price, service, or benefits); and communication of that message.

The four primary ways to segment your audience are by geography (regions, states,

cities); demographics (age, life-cycle stage, gender, income); psychographics (social class, lifestyle choices, personality); and behavior (occasions, benefits, user status, loyalty status).

The five main ways to differentiate your offering include product differentiation (different features, performance, or style and design); service differentiation (speedy, convenient, or careful delivery); channel differentiation (the channel's coverage, expertise, and performance); people differentiation (hiring and training better people); and image differentiation (strong and distinctive image that conveys a product's benefits and positioning).

PUT INTO PRACTICE

Let's say a practice wants to market its LASIK services and engage younger generations. Here is what an effective approach might look like:

1. **Overarching story:** "Your vision is a crucial part of your lifestyle, and you deserve better than glasses. We want to help you live your best life."
2. **Specific message:** "With LASIK, we can help you eliminate the need for glasses or contacts and help you live the life you have always dreamed of. It is safe, convenient, and a decision that will benefit you for the rest of your life."
3. **Analysis:** Your analysis should address the following questions:
 - **Who is our audience?** For LASIK, the audience is myopic millennials who no longer want to deal with glasses or contacts.
 - **How can we differentiate our product?** We are competitive in our pricing compared with other practices in our area, and our practice caters to millennials by offering a modern atmosphere, state-of-the-art technology, and the ultimate ease of use when it comes to the patient experience. At our practice, LASIK should feel as easy as sending a tweet.

- **How will we tell that story?** This is where the fun of specific marketing tactics comes in. Tailor and adapt your message to fit your audience's needs, decide where to tell your story and which medium to use to do so. These tactics can mean the difference between connecting with your audience or completely flopping.

With careful planning and strategic thinking, you can take your most basic business goal (let us perform your LASIK) and transform it into a meaningful, patient-centric message: "We believe you deserve the best. Your vision is a crucial part of your lifestyle, and you deserve better than glasses. There is something that can help you, called LASIK. With the professional, compassionate doctors in our state-of-the-art facility, the LASIK experience is as easy as tweeting."

FIRST THINGS FIRST

There is a time and a place for measuring ad spend, analytics, and growth on social channels—and there is no doubt it is important. But, if we want to get marketing right, that is not the place to start. If you, as an ophthalmologist, want to get marketing right, forget about restoring vision for a moment and focus on what your patients really want from you.

At the end of the day, the elderly man with the complex cataract does not truly care about seeing 20/20—he just wants to experience his grandson's tee-ball game. The recent retiree who has had problems with depth perception does not care about your femto-second laser—she wants to know that she will be able to compete in triathlons again.

Myopic marketing says, "Let's focus on promoting our new state-of-the-art surgery center." Authentic marketing says, "Let's make sure our patients know they are in good hands."

So, what do you patients believe

"STRIVE TO GIVE YOUR PATIENTS A MICROPHONE TO VOICE THEIR FEARS, HOPES, AND DESIRES, AND YOU WILL NEVER CONSIDER *MARKETING* A DIRTY WORD AGAIN."

about themselves? And what do you believe about your patients and your ability to help them?

Strive to give your patients a microphone to voice their fears, hopes, and desires, and you will never consider *marketing* a dirty word again; in turn, your patients will not even realize they are being marketed to. ■

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