Safety, Comfort, and the Reduction of Fear: Healthcare Messaging and Marketing

David L. McLain¹,a, Efstatios G. Kefallonitis¹

¹State University of New York at Oswego

a) Corresponding author: david.mclain@oswego.edu

Abstract: A common message when marketing healthcare services is to describe the capabilities and expert personnel to be found at the provider's facilities. Although this approach emphasizes information about quality to potential consumers, it overlooks other important influences on the motivation of a consumer to seek healthcare. Consumer motivation to seek healthcare services, when discretionary, may be slowed or diminished by fears of uncomfortable treatments or dreaded revelations. Uncertainty regarding physical discomfort, diagnosis of a serious malady, an onerous treatment regimen, exposure to embarrassment, incompletely understood consultation, test instructions, or follow-up scheduling, also serve to discourage the timely seeking or implementation of treatment. A strategic approach to the content of messages when marketing healthcare services takes into account these concerns, here called physical and psychological safety concerns, when competing for customers in the healthcare marketplace.

Keywords: Safety, healthcare, stress, consultation, diagnosis, treatment, compliance, follow-up, healthcare advertising.

1. Introduction

The strategic environment for health care services is increasing in complexity due to large changes in regulations, health care and technology, and patient demand [1], [2]. In this environment, many healthcare organizations have adopted proactive marketing strategies to strengthen their competitiveness and reduce risk (e.g., [3]). Common in those marketing strategies are the promotion of quality, provider capabilities, and personalization. Less frequently addressed is the consumer's perception of the experience, and risks, associated with care despite evidence that suggests that risks influence consumer expectations of the healthcare experience [4], [5] and that framing of messages influences patient choices [6], [7]. Because the selection of a provider is often determined by the availability of the provider and a recommendation or referral from another provider, marketing strategy is trying to influence relatively non-discretionary aspects of the patient's decision making. Aspects of the decision to seek treatment that are more discretionary, for example when to seek treatment or attend follow-up appointments, are less often a focus of
marketing strategy. Overall, consumers tend to view healthcare services as necessary but unpleasant (e.g., [8], [9], [10]). There appears to be a mismatch between the messages delivered as part of the marketing strategy at many healthcare institutions and the cognitive process of choosing an institution from the perspective of the individual needing healthcare.

In practice, frameworks for strategic healthcare marketing largely match the prescriptions laid out by scholars of economics and healthcare administration. Those prescriptions are often drawn from a macro-economic approach to strategy, emphasizing competition and institutional positioning in a competitive landscape [11], [12] and internal capabilities (e.g., [13]). Less emphasized are the perceptions and concerns of the individual consumer, or patient. Despite the extensively regulated and indirectly financed system that dominates the strategic management of healthcare organizations, the individual patient has a critical role as the decision maker who initiates the process of healthcare delivery and is central to determining the success of that process. Unfortunately, linking the patient's decision making at the level of individual cognition is difficult to map onto a marketing plan at the strategic level of the healthcare organization.

One reason it is difficult to develop a safety marketing strategy for a healthcare organization is the combination of external forces that demand strategic attention focus that attention on quality metrics and internal cost controls. Cost and quality dominate strategy because the system of incentives and regulatory constraints control the resources needed for these organizations to operate [14]. Rarely addressed but influential of individual choice in seeking treatment is aversion to uncertainty (e.g., [15]) and the avoidance of pain [16]. Individual cognition is described by several models that point to the perceived efficacy or control over illness that comes with seeking treatment (e.g., [17]), however, there lacks attention to the resources needed to measure patient's pre-clinical attitudes toward clinical safety, both physical and psychological. Without good measures of these patient attitudes, it is impossible to develop measurable strategic objectives for attracting patients and know when those objectives are achieved. Effective measurement is therefore critical to the effective implementation and ongoing management of healthcare marketing strategy.

Because of intermediary and collective systems that dominate healthcare cost management, the patient's decision to seek treatment is little influenced by the healthcare organization's cost control strategy and a lack of transparency means the decision is only partially influenced by outcome quality metrics. The quality metrics that matter are those that the patient can translate into expectations for personal experiences and outcomes such as the anticipated safety and comfort of diagnosis and treatment and the efficacy of that treatment for her or him. Theory of the translation of attitudes into behaviors points out that control over a situation is an important influence on whether attitudes result in intention to take action [17]. The patient experiences a lack of control over the healthcare experience because the patient transfers perceived control of his or her physical and psychological well-being over to the provider and staff of the healthcare organization when at the healthcare clinic. The need for healthcare and the limitations on the consumer's control of the experience make this stressful [18]. Healthcare marketing is designed to sway choices about seeking healthcare when those choices are within the consumer's discretion. However, it is that discretion which is most impacted by perceived risks and the consumer perceives both physical risks, for example pain, and psychological risks such as discomfort with information sharing, as associated with seeking healthcare. In those aspects of healthcare that are not discretionary, marketing messages have little relevance. Somewhat in contrast with the marketing of many products and services, enhancing the motivation to buy is not as important as enhancing the motivation to initiate the process or follow instructions making perceived risk an important element of the consumer's healthcare decision making and one that deserves attention in marketing efforts.
In some areas of healthcare marketing, perceived risks have received attention. Considerable attention has been given to claims and regulations that address the communication of pharmaceutical risks to consumers [2]. Attention to physical comfort has become an element of dental services marketing [19] and, increasingly, researchers are looking at differential risk associated with procedures in the growing medical tourism industry [20]. These instances of attention to consumer's anticipations of the healthcare experience and its risks can be helpful in guiding others to expand the strategic marketing of healthcare safety to other areas of healthcare and to aid in the development of a more complete model of the consumer’s discretionary choice to seek healthcare.

In this paper, the authors take the perspective that an innovative healthcare marketing strategy can seek patient attraction goals at the strategic level of the organization by implementing tactics that recognize the motivational influences of patient hopes and fears regarding treatment and accomplishes this with messages that promote healthcare safety. The promotion of healthcare safety is achieved not only by providing information about the risks and benefits of specific treatments but also by reducing that part of uncertainty where fears arise and promoting a sense of control over the path from illness to health in partnership with the healthcare organization. The next task in this paper is to define the concept of healthcare safety.

1.1 A Definition of Anticipated Healthcare Safety
The cognitive interpretation of safety is widely studied as perceived risk [21] which is a combination of the perceived likelihood of the conceivable set of undesired outcomes and the perceived severities of those outcomes. In the context of healthcare procedures, the outcomes fall into two categories: physical and psychological. Risks to the healthcare consumer include the probability of physical pain, sharing and security of information about one's health and lifestyle, and the possibility of receiving information about serious but undiagnosed or unconfirmed health problems. Other risks include discomfort from examination, laboratory testing, treatment, procedures, and follow-up treatments. Psychological safety is also threatened by these risks and in the anticipated exposing of information about the patient's lifestyle, public image and reputation, or relationships with others. Fear also associates with embarrassment about personal hygienic state or behavior, past management of personal health, timeliness in getting care, physical attributes, past misbehaviors, inability to remember, or simply revealing personal information. There may also be fear of declining health that, while it remains ambiguous, is not as threatening as a confirming diagnosis. There is also the threat to personal financial safety that comes from a risk of large healthcare costs and the frustration and complexity of organizational policies, procedures, and payment processes. There may even be the fear of healthcare personnel who may pose a risk of brusque or blunt interactions that cause the consumer anticipatory anxiety. Anticipated healthcare safety is the term used here to describe a cognitive representation of the risks to personal well-being and comfort, physical and psychological, associated with a future interaction with a healthcare organization, its personnel, and facilities.

2. Strategic Messaging in Healthcare Services: the Current State
Healthcare marketing is primarily about communicating information that describes and promotes the quality of healthcare services to potential patients—the analysis of these messages seeks to estimate the integrative effect that the various marketing techniques have on patient motivations [22]. Quality assessments are usually conducted both internally, as part of a quality assurance program, and externally, by seeking feedback from patients regarding the experience of visiting the healthcare organization and being treated by the institution's personnel.

Some generalities exist regarding healthcare marketing messages:
   a) Most messaging signals quality.
b) Messages that reduce the uncertainties of seeking care are rare. A contrary example is the marketing of low-discomfort dental surgical services.

c) The seeking of healthcare is less discretionary than many purchasing decisions. The factors that influence those decisions may differ in relative influence on decisions regarding healthcare. Marketing messages that seek to attract patients must concentrate on the discretionary aspects of patient choice.

What literature exists suggests that healthcare marketing addresses the following aspects of care and the provider institution, although the prevalence of messages about each aspect varies: ethics, satisfaction, safety concerns, ambiguity, limited patient control, cost, and the number of health care providers. In addition, medical tourism continues to emerge as an important direction in health marketing [23], [24]. Some of these aspects are related to the less discretionary part of patient decision making.

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Table 1. Healthcare marketing messaging areas discussed in literature

2.1 Ethics: Communication of Ethical and Safe Practices as a Marketing Tool

The ethical component of healthcare marketing includes messages related to: (a) the promotion of medications, (b) physician quality, (c) the nature of medical procedures, and (d) characteristics of facilities. There is increasing discussion regarding whether medication advertisements are ethical, since they are not always informational but are often promotional in intent. At the same time, the over-prescription of medications as well as an increase in unnecessary patient screenings and check-ups raises concerns. The way that patient medical records are handled and how this information is shared is also a source of concern. Another concern is the large volume and variety of medications that are produced overseas at relatively low cost but that, when imported, are associated with dramatic price increases. This has driven patients to seek alternate channels, such as internet sources, for acquiring their medication from other countries where retail pharmaceutical prices are considerably lower.

2.2 A Strategy to Deliver Messages that Address Quality Concerns

Although patients are concerned about the experience and risks of seeking treatment, the quality of that treatment is an important patient concern. Quality concerns can be grouped into two categories: concerns about the provider personnel and concerns about the healthcare institution where those personnel provide healthcare services. The first category describes concerns about the ability of the provider to successfully diagnose, treat the patient, and lead the patient to good health. Principally, these concerns are associated with the attending physician but also includes the nurses, technicians, and other provider personnel. The second
category describes concerns related to the quality reputation of the provider institution and serves as a proxy for perceptions of quality of the providers. In this sense, these concerns are closely related, however, for strategic marketing purposes, these can serve as separate sets of messages that address patient concerns. Safety messages can directly inform patient’s perceptions by providing information about the quality of the providers’ abilities to reduce risks to the patient’s psychological or physical well-being. Similarly, messages that describe the institution’s history or abilities to reduce those risks can indirectly increase confidence in the personnel to accomplish the same reductions. Patients desire this information but it is often lacking, leading patients to seek the information from friends, family, or in many instances, from unfamiliar people who simply make unofficial and unverifiable statements about their treatment experiences at the institution or its providers.

2.3 Patient Satisfaction and Marketing Strategy

Medical facilities often require patients to evaluate the service received by completing a questionnaire and providing feedback. Satisfaction is one of the most widely measured outcomes of the healthcare experience but its use as an element of strategy is more limited. Medical facilities that communicate a bill of rights get evaluated based on the gathered data. Many hospitals and healthcare institutions measure patient satisfaction and a few institutions that receive favorable reports tout those results, but few institutions explain the meaning of the information or explain what aspects of the patient experience are captured by patient satisfaction surveys. Such surveys can ask about a variety of aspects of the patient experience and variation in responses to distinct aspects can be helpful in both understanding what the patient experiences and what to do to strategically improve the patient experience and reduce patient concerns.

Patient satisfaction is constructed from a number of influences, for example, satisfaction is affected by the success of the medical operation, recovery time, and the overall experience of treatment [36]. Another element influencing satisfaction is the convenience of accessing care. This may reflect perceptions of the availability or use of a medication, the location of a healthcare provider, timing of an operation, or the appropriateness of healthcare costs. Patient satisfaction measures have the value of adding richness to the other patient outcome information obtained as a result of providing care by informing the institution about the patient’s psychological experience. That information can help describe the effectiveness of efforts to reduce patient fears and increase a patient’s sense of well-being. It can also be used to improve satisfaction measures so that information is obtained that better guides marketing efforts toward the messaging of patient safety.

2.4 Safety: Country brand and medical tourism safety

An increasing number of countries have pursued the medical tourism industry as a prominent element of their country brand and marketing campaigns. This helps potential patients identify countries they can visit to obtain medical procedures [37]. Countries like Costa Rica, Brazil, Mexico and others have seen an increasing number of medical tourists over the last ten years. Often, medical tourists combine a surgical procedure with recovery time at the same location. Locating a medical facility at a popular overseas location often serves to motivate patients to seek treatment there. These overseas facilities and the host countries that seek to strengthen their brand as a medical tourism destination, often employ international physicians and staff from the country of origin of the patients. This reduces concerns about the competency, quality, and expertise of providers and staff. These concerns are key psychological obstacles discouraging the seeking of treatment. The often-attractive cost of a medical procedure performed overseas works as an additional incentive for patients that consider this option.

2.5 Ambiguity
Healthcare is predominantly a service-oriented industry and patients often find it difficult to comprehend and evaluate the services received. The more complex a procedure may be, the more ambiguous that procedure may seem to the patient. With the depth of information available online, patients often seek information on the Web to reduce the ambiguity. Unfortunately, the veracity and relevance of medical information on the Web varies greatly with some of that information being misleading or incorrect. Other Web information is difficult to apply to one’s own situation because the information depends on substantial medical knowledge or on an understanding of the interaction of the issue of interest with other health states of the individual patient. For these and other reasons, the patient’s physician remains the most important source of health information for many patients. The patient may seek multiple physician opinions in instances of serious or ambiguous diagnoses or multiple treatment options. This helps reduce the patient’s ambiguity and the associated anxiety but the availability and value of physician or other provider information is largely absent from many healthcare marketing strategies.

2.6 Patient Input to the Direction of Healthcare Program Change
The traditional culture of the healthcare system and the institutions within it is hierarchical and in that culture the patient role is subordinate to the providers and institutional administration. That culture does not place a high value on the patient’s perspective when changes are considered in the institution and the care process. This is a weakness in many healthcare marketing strategies. An opportunity exists to increase patient input in decisions about change. This input can come from informed patients that have expert knowledge because of their professional roles in healthcare professions or from patients that have no professional knowledge of the institution or healthcare and therefore provide an outsider’s perspective on the healthcare experience and the perceptions of the majority, or at least many, of the institution’s patients. By soliciting these patients’ insights, marketing strategy can benefit from information gathered from patients describing their perceptions of the perceived safety of the treatment experience.

2.7 Cost
Rising costs of healthcare treatment often take a front seat in public healthcare debates. In practice, the cost of healthcare is distributed between patients, in the form of copayments, and secondary payment organizations, primarily insurance companies. Marketing strategy that promotes cost advantages should recognize the cost borne by the individual and the discretion of that individual. When there is choice and the costs vary, a marketing strategy has an opportunity to highlight the institution’s advantage. When costs are set or controlled by secondary organizations or there is little patient discretion, cost messages are less valuable in a marketing strategy.

2.8 Medical Tourism and City-Branding
Medical tourism has also emerged as an element of city-branding. It stretches a city’s brand association further by enhancing the visitors’ perceptions of a city as a healthcare destination. This is known as destination branding and helps can take the personality of a city to new territories. Branding cities as healthcare destinations has great advantages in the local and national economies, by increasing medical tourists and investments. As with country-branding of medical tourism, the marketing strategy of cities that promote medical tourism should address patient safety concerns. Patients will be traveling large distances to seek treatment relative to their experience for routine medical care. Patients will also be outside the region where they have the most familiarity with healthcare providers. Distant providers are unfamiliar and marketing strategy that seeks to familiarize potential patients with providers and facilities can help to reduce stress that may be associated with seeking remote treatment.
3. Ways of Improving Healthcare Messaging Services: A strategic approach

There are several actions that leadership can take to make safety marketing a part of the organization’s strategy. Figure 1 depicts these actions in categories.

3.1 External Marketing Messages

Oversee marketing campaigns to ensure messages address not only quality but uncertainty and fear reduction. Recognize that fears and uncertainties serve as barriers to seeking healthcare, following treatment plans, and coming back for needed long-term care. External marketing messages should include content that addresses specific fears that patients have and do so in a way that speaks to the individual. Marketing strategy should differentiate the services provided by the organization in terms of healthcare safety. This strategy of differentiation can be difficult to copy among organizations competing for your patients if marketing messages are tied to the quality of services you provide and the safety expertise of your specific personnel. Although safety procedures and the provision of specific healthcare services are important to communicate in marketing campaigns, these can be copied by competitors. Among the elements of strategy that cannot be easily copied are the personnel who provide care and interact with patients regarding safety and comfort.

3.2 Hiring, Training, and Development of Caregivers

The unique abilities of your personnel to tailor safety and comfort to each patient’s individual needs is difficult to copy and serves as a strategic advantage. The resources needed to achieve this strategy lie in the hiring and training of personnel regarding their knowledge of patient safety management and interaction with patients. The continuing education of personnel should take into consideration the desirability of personnel to be well-informed, skilled, and up-to-date regarding patient safety.

Built into this aspect of strategy should be training of personnel to maintain an ongoing communication with patients regarding a balanced approach to fears. A balanced approach shares messages that acknowledge and respect the patient’s fears but also informs the patient about the latest developments in safety and the ability to reduce undesirable experiences in diagnosis and treatment. Recognize that quality messages reduce fear about poor healthcare outcomes but there are many other fears. Train personnel not to concentrate solely on quality and efficiency messages.
3.3 Information Management and Security

A critical element of safety strategy is information management strategy. One component of this element is the provision of a system for promoting patient communication and feedback. Provide ways for prospective consumers to contact your organization and obtain information that can reduce specific fears and uncertainties prior to coming to your facilities. Incorporate communication technology and web information that enables consumers to obtain this information. Follow-up with patients who visit your facilities and ask, for example, if fears were reduced by interactions with personnel and facilities.

A second element of information management strategy is information security. Resources needed to comply with and exceed regulatory requirements are strategic. Making clear to patients that your organization not only complies but values the protection and confidentiality of patient information reduces fears that patients have regarding information safety. That form of safety can enhance patient interactions with care providers by encouraging the patient to share information useful for diagnosis and treatment.

3.4 Follow-up Inquiries Regarding Patient Experiences

Post-interaction surveys that follow-up interactions between customers and sellers on the Web are widely popular. Such surveys can be brief but accomplish more than gathering information from customers about their purchases or choices. In the healthcare environment, such follow-up inquiries can not only gather information about satisfaction with provider interactions but also send a signal to patients that the provider and the healthcare organization care about the patient and encourage the patient to be vigilant in following recommendations and treatment requirements. The easier it is for the patient to engage in post-visit interactions with providers and the organization, the more likely the patient will maintain engagement with treatment and hold a positive opinion of the experience, the organization, and its people.

3.5 Internal Handling of the Patient’s Safety and Comfort

Ask patients if they have specific fears or uncertainties. Address each in confident, realistic communication. Introduce a structured patient reception process that directly opens communication about fears and uncertainties from the beginning of the process of consumer interaction. This includes marketing techniques but is not limited to marketing. Fears and uncertainties can be complex and interactive communication with a sensitive human may be a valuable strategic technique in competing for healthcare customers.

Respect for the patient and patient’s family, often a critical part of treatment effectiveness and the patient’s visit to the caregiver, is an important building block in the formation of trust between the patient and provider. There are several conditions of trust that can be incorporated into a strategy to market healthcare safety [38], [39], [40]. Among these are marketing messages that encourage confidence in patients that the best reasonable care will be provided and that caregivers will be reliable and predictable in delivering care. In addition, marketing that is personal and sensitive to the individual patient’s concerns promotes a shared understanding between patient and institution regarding the care process. A warning is warranted, however, in that trust that is broken by public, negative information about the organization or its caregivers will require much effort and time to repair if trust is to be broadly reestablished in the patient population.

3.6 Monitoring External Developments in Patient Safety and Comfort

In the healthcare professions, continuing medical education is common, even required, for the maintenance of professional standing. Continuing education and monitoring of developments in standards of care and healthcare technologies also serve a strategic marketing function. Marketing of the extent of such continuing education and the areas studied by personnel promotes understanding among
patients of the competency of providers. Education that teaches the latest skills in patient safety is also valuable in promoting a safety culture within the organization. Programs that reduce waste and help organize the healthcare environment are also valuable in reducing errors, and therefore promote safety [41]. Such programs can be a part of internal marketing to encourage support and compliance. Such programs can also be part of an external marketing to communicate the organization’s commitment to improvement. Together, these ongoing efforts are part of a strategic approach to safety marketing.

4. Future Directions

The aforementioned areas of attention in the strategic marketing of healthcare represent areas where continued changes in healthcare are expected to result in shifting emphases and new opportunities for marketing. For example, the average age of patients in the Western world is expected to rise in coming years. Concurrently, there will be an increasing need to concentrate marketing strategy on the safety concerns of older patients.

Self-reporting and self-generated medical information is here to stay, particularly due to the growing use of powerful, portable, communication and computing technologies. Handheld devices such as cellphones and wearable devices are capable of monitoring basic health functions. A primary element of the marketing of these devices is their abilities to monitor and communicate health information. As these devices grow in sophistication, they will be grow in the ability to work well with physician instructions and will become devices that strengthen preventative medicine. The use of tele-medicine and remote devices that help physicians assess a situation remotely will also grow in capabilities and availability. Local facilities will be equipped with devices that may require minimum physician presence, as medical equipment becomes more autonomous in conducting tests and check-ups. These facilities would be marketed as one-stop-shops and add to the convenience of the patience experience.

Continuing growth in the use of social media is anticipated to have impact in the way that both patients and healthcare providers communicate. Social media can be used for two purposes: (a) by healthcare providers as an additional channel of marketing communication and (b) by the public for communicating in a timely manner with healthcare providers. Healthcare providers that use social media may reduce patient stress by communicating information on medication and procedures [42]. This would be particularly popular among younger patients and those patients who are technology-savvy. There are tremendous growth opportunities for the use of social media to not only educate but also help reduce inconsistencies, and ensure and strengthen the communication of quality. Social media have also been used as a customer service channel, accompanying the traditional national customer service number.

The use of social media by the public and patients in particular, helps create online communities of like-minded individuals [43]. The members of these virtual communities create online bonds and a sense of belonging to people that have the same or similar interests [44]. These individuals often create personal blogs, and participate in discussions at healthcare and pharmaceutical social media pages on Facebook, YouTube etc. Overall they share anecdotal stories based on similar experiences with medications, physicians and healthcare establishments.

Another area that is expected to grow is that of the protection of patient records. A large majority of patient records are saved on digital drives making access easier but also more risky should there occur a security breach.

The use of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, will also mirror changes in the ways that healthcare services are marketed. Healthcare providers will be able to provide customized packages and programs that will better meet the needs of individuals. The creation of customized profiles for each patient will allow highly personalized and specialized attention, increasing healthy competition by
offering alternatives. The importance of big data and the interdependency of healthcare knowledge systems will provide necessary analytics for the prediction and early identification of diseases and their cure. This will call for the removal of knowledge sharing barriers to create greater healthcare solutions. This would also reflect an integration of healthcare management systems and a push to streamline and adopt more global goals.

The optimal mix for healthcare services will be a bundle of digital and conventional practices customized to the needs of the individual. This will ensure that each and every patient will have a greater likelihood of getting healthcare messages, and care, that are exactly what is needed.

5. Conclusion

Placing healthcare safety in a strategic marketing role can improve patient – provider interactions and ease the concerns of patients that discourage prompt seeking of care and induce patient stress. These are, indirectly, important steps at the beginning of the process by which a healthcare organization provides care and achieves good patient outcomes. Discussing the expansion of the concept of healthcare marketing strategy, beyond a limited effort to advertise services and providers, is the goal of this paper and is intended to support a process that contributes to quality care. This article approaches the strategic marketing of healthcare safety from both the patient’s perspective on healthcare safety and the healthcare organization’s composition of strategy, and encourages further exploration of this topic.

References

[3] Rooney


