MARKETING

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THIS CHAPTER WILL INCLUDE A REVIEW OF:

- Merchandising and marketing
- Ethics and marketing
- Advertising
- Selling
- Marketing plan
- Communication
- Personalities
- Communicating with different groups
- Problem solving
- Written communication

INTRODUCTION

Optometry practices are retail businesses and as such require promotion. Many countries once prohibited professionals such as doctors, optometrists and lawyers from advertising on the grounds that it was unprofessional. This is relatively rare today if it exists at all. Nevertheless, even in such circumstances some promotion is still required in order to make people aware of the practice.

Optometrists also require skills of selling and merchandising, unless they are purely refracting practices. It is important to realise that selling can be consistent with professional behaviour. This Chapter examines the principles of marketing, merchandising and advertising and the concept of the 'marketing mix'.

MERCHANDISING AND MARKETING

Merchandising and marketing are very similar but subtly different concepts. Merchandising can be considered as a subset of marketing and involves the choice of and selling of products. Marketing is the promotion of both goods and services and involves product and price selection.

Marketing can be defined as, “Product planning - getting the right product to the right market, at the right price, and in the right colours and sizes.” (Stanton, W J (1984) Fundamentals of Marketing)

Although marketing is often considered synonymous with advertising, it is a much broader concept of which advertising is only a part. Marketing includes analysis of the market and all strategies for promoting the practice, including advertising.

Research of the local area is essential as a prelude to setting up the practice and the data will then be used to inform the marketing strategy. Proper market research should be carried out using readily available resources, such as Bureaux of Statistics, local councils and local chambers of commerce.

Marketing is intended to encourage potential customers to buy the products and/or services of a business. Some businesses will aim to create demand for a product or service that has not existed in a particular area while others will try to tap into an existing demand. Marketing can be divided into four basic functions, known as the ‘marketing mix’ or ‘the four Ps of marketing’

- Product
- Price
- Place
- Promotion

Product

The term product is used in its broadest meaning and includes services such as eye tests as well as physical goods such as spectacles and contact lenses. Physical goods, such as spectacles, in particular, may be grouped in certain sets, such as budget spectacles, children’s spectacles and high fashion spectacles.

Price

The prices of products such as spectacles are likely to be guided by the type of practice and the range of spectacles on offer. There are several options for pricing the eye examination: It may be included in the overall cost of the spectacles provided; or a fee may be set for the consultation; or it may be covered by government subsidy.

Place

This part of the marketing mix was considered in the setting up of the practice. The choice of location is a significant factor in marketing goods and services. The place selected will have an impact on the products sold and their prices.

Promotion

Promotion covers a broad functional area including:

- Advertising
- Merchandising
- Selling
- Displays

Promotion is how the message is conveyed to the patients. Again it is a broader concept than advertising which is but one type of promotion.

ETHICS AND MARKETING

Marketing, particularly in the case of a profession such as optometry must be ethical. A current ethical debate in ophthalmic optics in some countries is the sale of plano, coloured contact lenses. Sale of these lenses by unqualified personnel to teenagers may be considered unethical given that there may be compliance issues on the part of the users, notably sharing of lenses. There may even be ethical concerns where optometrists supply to teenagers when they have concerns about how they may be used.

ETHICS AND MARKETING(CONT.)

It is important, though, not to consider ethics and selling as antonyms. Professional selling is the recommending of products a professional considers appropriate for their patient. A comment in a British journal, Dispensing Optics April 2003, by a lens coating engineer puts this view in some perspective; *"… is it ethical to offer the inferior vision of an uncoated lens to spectacle wearers, when an easy solution to superior vision is available?"* Dr Peter Wilkinson, PhD BSc (eng) C Eng MIMechE.

ADVERTISING

Advertising is a very effective way of promoting a business or products. The level of effectiveness depends on the quality of the advertising and the advertising medium selected.

The most cost effective form of advertising is "word of mouth" or recommendations by satisfied patients. Providing excellent and professional service is paramount in marketing a business.

Advertising can be expensive and yield poor results if it is not targeted to the population you are trying to reach with your optometry clinic. It is important to commit to an annual advertising budget, for example 4% of turnover, then calculate expenditure and choose the most effective marketing categories.Consider approaching your optical wholesalers who may share the cost of product promotion combined with your practice name.For a small optometry practice, advertising that is geographically targeted is more effective than the more expensive widely spread media such as metropolitan television or newspapers.

The international success of brand names such as Coca-Cola and McDonalds are evidence of the power of advertising. Small optometry practices are unlikely to achieve the fame of these brands but advertising can benefit them in a more modest way. Advertising vehicles vary in their accessibility and usefulness for an optometry practice. There are several types of relatively low cost advertising that are available to and suitable for small businesses such as optometry practices. The following review of advertising media gives some indication of the usefulness to a typical optometry practice:

Television

Television advertising is the most expensive form of advertising and is normally outside the budget of most optometry practices unless they are a part of a larger group or a franchise. However, there may be possibilities in smaller regional locations where television advertising costs may be more modest.

Radio

Radio is less expensive than television and may be an option for optometry practices, particularly in regional areas. Higher metropolitan radio advertising costs normally put them out of the budget of an optometry practice.

Also, because of the wide geographical audience of metropolitan radio much of the effort is wasted since many listeners will not reside in the local community of the practice.

Metropolitan newspapers

Daily newspapers in large cities are usually expensive with regard to advertising space and, like television and radio, may be prohibitive for small practices. Also, as with metropolitan radio, many of the readers are not potential patients given the broad circulation of these papers.

Local newspapers

These present a more attractive option for optometry practices. Advertising space is usually quite reasonable and the readership normally matches the target population. That is, they are read by people living in the local area.

Magazines

Advertising space in glossy magazines is very high and again will usually be beyond the budget of small practices. Once again, many of the readers are not potential patients.

Brochures

Brochures are relatively cheap and may present a useful option for optometry practices. These can be dropped in local letterboxes or merely handed out to visitors to the practice.

ADVERTISING(CONT.)

Direct mail outs

Direct mail outs are also useful and relatively inexpensive. They are particularly suitable for a new optometry practice wishing to become known in itsnew location. Reminder letters are another form of direct mail advertising.

Telephone directories

Telephone directories, print and on-line, are usually a necessity for most businesses. Many directories offer larger space and even colour for an increased fee.

Cinemas

Cinemas can provide surprisingly inexpensive advertising and also have the benefit of being localised.

Billboards and bus stop signs

Billboards and smaller bus stop signs, like cinemas, can provide relatively inexpensive advertising and, once again, have the benefit of being localised.

Uniforms

Staff uniforms are a subtle form of advertising, particularly when employees are out of the office, for example visiting the bank or getting lunch.

Vehicles

Some optometrists will choose to have a sign on their car, providing advertising wherever it travels.

Sponsorship of local sporting teams (notably junior teams)

This form of advertising not only promotes the practice name in the local community but also establishes the practice as a good corporate citizen.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE COST OF ADVERTISING

The cost of advertising is a function of several factors.

Circulation

The size of the potential audience for the advertisement is the most important factor in determining the cost of advertising. It is more expensive to advertise in a national newspaper than a metropolitan newspaper and more expensive in a metropolitan paper than a local paper. It is also the reason that ‘prime time’ television is more expensive for running advertisements than the middle of the day or late at the night.

The life of the advertising

Some advertising media have a longer life than others. For example, newspapers are rarely kept beyond the day that they are published. Magazines, though, are often kept for much longer and often sit on coffee tables or in doctors’ or optometrists’ waiting rooms. Television and radio advertisements have a very short life (unless they are repeated) but uniforms and cars have a very long life.

Colour and graphics

If colour is used in print advertisements it is more likely to have a greater impact. Photos and illustrations will also attract more attention than just print. However, colour and graphics add significant cost to any advertising.

Size

The size of the advertisement in the newspaper or magazine or telephone directory, or the length of a television or radio advertisement, will significantly affect its effectiveness and its cost: the bigger or longer the advertisement the greater its effect and the higher the cost.

Positioning

For print advertisements the advertisement should not be too small, and it should be longer than it is wide. There should be an area of clear space around the outside of the advertisement; that is, it should not go right to the edge of the space. Ideally, the advertisement should include a photo or at least a drawing and some colour to attract attention.

ADVERTISING(CONT.)

In the case of newspapers, advertisements placed closer to the front page attract more interests and as a result cost more. It has also been shown that right hand pages (facing pages) are more likely to be read than left hand pages and so there is also a premium for those pages. The reverse would probably be true for countries that read from right to left.

INTERNET PROMOTION

Most businesses today have an internet site which can be very useful in attracting new patients. Today's computer-literate public will often check on the website of an optometrist they are considering consulting. Many of the principles of print advertising apply to internet sites. The site should have a professional image, be easy to navigate around and present all the information that the patient is likely to need; qualifications of the optometrist, product range, areas of expertise (eg ortho K or contact lenses), and contact details. As with any form of promotion or advertising, it is wise to seek professional advice to achieve the best possible result.

An expert will also advise on how to make your site easy to find. This would involve the use of key words on the site and knowledge on the expert's part of the workings of search engines such as Google and Yahoo. Your site could also include a hit counter to monitor exactly how many people are viewing the site. It is also possible to pay to have your site promoted on a search for optometric services. The charges for such a service are often based on the number of 'hits'.

SELLING

Selling is an important function of merchandising. More importantly, it is also an essential part of optometry. The selling function, however, must be guided by professional ethics. As mentioned earlier, there is no inherent conflict between professional optometry and selling.

An important part of selling and professional practice is personal presentation. This includes grooming, the standard of dress, speech, writing and body language. Note that a high standard of dress and grooming is expected of optometrists and their staff. Presentation should be guided by the expectations of the patients, not the desires of the optometrist or his or her staff. Many of the patients of an optometrists practice will be presbyopes and therefore older than 45 years of age. As such there may be a tendency towards more conservative views on dress and appearance.

Personal presentation also applies to written communications. Some argue that spelling is unimportant and that it is the message that counts. However, poor spelling may convey a message that the writer is careless. As a result, poor spellers should have a good speller proofread their work. Good spelling is unlikely to annoy a poor speller but poor spelling may annoy a good speller.

DISPLAYS

Some parts of a spectacle frame rack are more accessible than others and as a result will attract more attention than others. Patients are only likely to look at frames they can reach. So spectacles on racks that are tucked away in a corner are not likely to have a high turnover.

Shop windows also play an important part in attracting clientele into a practice. They should be updated because they are seen constantly by people passing the practice. It is also essential to keep all displays clean and tidy and to replace frames removed from frame racks.

MARKETING PLAN

The marketing plan must fit in with and address the objectives of the business plan: it can and should be considered as part of the business plan. The marketing and the objectives of the business need to be in harmony for the marketing to be effective and for the business objectives to be achieved. Furthermore, the costs of marketing must be included in the financial plan. While there is no set structure for a marketing plan, it can be based on the four Ps of marketing. For example:

MARKETING PLAN(CONT.)

Product

The practice should decide on the types of stock to carry. As with all parts of the marketing plan, this aspect needs to fit in with the overall business plan. For example, for a fashion based practice the plan would be to carry mainly fashion frames and few, if any, budget lines.

Price

A fashion based practice would normally involve higher prices without a discount price focus, whereas a budget store would be focussed on promoting lower prices and may have planned discount schemes.

Place

This is determined during the planning phase when setting up the practice. Nevertheless it is still a part of the marketing plan and the reasoning for the choice should be recorded.

Promotion

Promotion consists of advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, publicity and public relations. It also includes static displays such as frame racks and window displays. This will be a major part of the ongoing marketing plan and the most variable. The marketing plan and any promotional or advertising campaign, as with all aspects of the business plan, need to be evaluated regularly to determine whether they are working or require change.

The effects can be measured directly by use of a survey. The use of patient satisfaction surveys has been popular for many years, particularly in hospitals and large medical practices. The effects of specific programs can also be measured by using a dedicated phone line only mentioned in that promotional program. Responses on this line will give a direct indication of the effects of any program.

SELLINGSTEPS

There are four main steps to selling:

Step 1: The approach

Given that first impressions can be very important, the initial greeting of the patient should not be undervalued. It is best to avoid closed questions such as ‘Can I help you?’ Questioning techniques will be discussed shortly.

It is also important to acknowledge the patient immediately if engaged with someone else. Any tasks which do not involve a patient, such as working on a computer, should be stopped to deal with someone who has entered the practice.

Step 2: The presentation

During this stage the optometrist or his/her staff should find out the patient’s specific needs and recommend frames and lenses that will meet those needs. The optometrist also has a chance to determine this information in the consulting room and so make the dispensing task more straightforward.

Step 3: Overcoming objections

The recommended spectacles may raise certain objections on the part of the patient. For example, the suggestion of coated polycarbonate lenses and a titanium frame for a child may raise the question of price relative to perceived durability. In such a case the practitioner should try to take the emphasis out of durability and concentrate on the protection offered by polycarbonate and the comfort and adjustment holding ability of titanium.

It is important that a patient’s concerns are not merely dismissed, they must be addressed satisfactorily.

Step 4: Closing the sale

The optometrist should ask for a commitment for example by discussing the delivery times or method of payment. This is where closed question (as suggested below) can be useful.

The quality of the advice given to the patient is dependent on the depth and recency of the practitioner’s product knowledge. The best approach to selling is referred to as top-down selling. This approach assumes that the patient is offered the best option for their needs and, if this proves to be too expensive, enhancements are removed to reduce the price. This may merely involve the selection of a less-expensive frame, rather than eliminating lens enhancements. A part of the logic of top-down selling is that it is easier to come down in price than to add to a price already given.

MARKETING PLAN(CONT.)

SELLING MULTIPLE PAIRS

Most ophthalmic professionals are aware that one pair of spectacles will not be suitable for all visual tasks, just as one pair of shoes will not be suitable for playing tennis, working in an office and casual wear. However, many of these same professionals are concerned about suggesting more than one pair of spectacles for their patients because they believe it may appear to be pressure selling. However, as professionals, optometrists have a duty to inform. There is a professional responsibility to let patients know what is best for them and all the options. The patients will ultimately decide whether to buy or not.

COMMUNICATION

QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

Communication is an essential part of an optometrists work, whether it is in recording the patient's history or in determining the best lens and frame combination. Asking appropriate questions is an important part of this process. There are three different types of questions; each controls the conversation in different ways and produce different outcomes.

Questioning also involves active listening, not merely hearing. The distinction between listening and hearing is discussed below.

Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions are questions cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'.

They generally begin with words like how, why and what. They are effective in eliciting more detailed responses and therefore more information from the patient. Examples are; "How do you sit when reading?"; "What kind of work do you do?"

Closed questions

Closed questions can be answered with a 'yes' or 'no'. They will usually begin with words such as 'can', 'do' or 'did'. They can be used to get a particular important piece of information after you have established the patient's needs. They can also be used to close the sale with questions such as, "Can you pick these up next week?"

Reflective questions

These are sometimes referred to as 'mirror questions', because they are used to show that you have understood what the patient is saying or to check that you have understood correctly. These are used to great effect by the top television interviewers.

PERSONALITIES

Optometrists are likely to be faced with a variety of personalities in their practice. It is important for the optometrist to remember that they also have a personality and that their own personality may be in conflict with their patient's.

The following are some of the personalities traits identified and methods of handling their particular requirements.

Extraversion – Introversion

This is the relative preference for social interaction and activity. For example, if an introvert is shy they may seek anonymity and avoid the limelight. The optometrist may need to encourage them and have plenty of patience when dealing with them. They need to be handled sensitively and guided in their decision making.

By contrast, the extrovert may need to be kept on task. They will often stray into irrelevant conversations.

Emotional stability – Emotional Instability

This is the tendency to experience unpleasant emotions easily or not. The more stable person is likely to persevere with small inconveniences and overcome them if they know there is a good chance of success

Unstable emotions are displayed in situations where a person feels uncomfortable. If something happens that is unexpected then this person may become anxious or concerned.

PERSONALITIES(CONT.)

Agreeableness – Disagreeableness

This is the tendency (or not) to be compassionate towards others and not be antagonistic. The agreeable person will listen to advice and recommendations. The disagreeable patient will need more persuasion.

Openness to Experience – Closed to Experience

Openness is the tendency to enjoy new experiences. Someone who is open minded is likely to be willing to try new concepts and new products and new ideas. The close minded person needs proof, and will probably respond well to a demonstration so they can see for themselves that the lens works.

One of the ways we show empathy or caring about people is to reflect or copy the kind of language that they use. If they speak in slang, do the same as far as it feels comfortable. If they talk in a polite and formal way, once again try to do the same. It is important to understand that many people express themselves in terms of their preferred way of getting information about the world.

Good communication is critical to the success of any business. Many businesses believe that a relative lack of complaints suggests success. However, it is believed that only one out of 20 unhappy patients will complain; the rest will go to another practice next time. Therefore, a lack of complaints is not an absolute guarantee that everyone is happy.

PERSONAL SPACE

Most people feel uncomfortable when a stranger or acquaintance is too close to them. The area around each person that they prefer to be kept free is referred to as their personal space and it will vary from person to person and across cultures. Optometrists will often invade this personal space during the course of an eye examination, notably during direct ophthalmoscopy. Patients, though often feeling uncomfortable, will accept this professional invasion of space but will not be so accepting if the space is invaded, even by the same optometrist, in conversation. Because optometrists are required to be very close to their patients during the examination it is important that they adopt a professional manner. They should also ensure that their hands clean and that they have fresh breath.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Non-verbal communication are the subliminal messages given by facial expressions, such as smiling, and body posture, such as looking away from the patient or folding one's arms. It is important to face the patient and, where culturally appropriate, maintain eye contact. It is important to be aware of posture, facial expressions and appearance. The patient needs to sense from the non verbal clues that the optometrist is interested and empathetic. Again, this will be determined by locally acceptable behaviours and customs.

LISTENING VS. HEARING

It is possible to hear without paying attention to what one is hearing. Listening implies that you are paying attention and this can be shown through the use of reflective questions. That is, asking for further clarification of what they may have said. Listening and reflective questions are critical tools in successful problem solving.

PROBLEM SOLVING

The keys to successful problem solving are listening and a methodical approach to finding a solution. It also requires a calm and non-defensive demeanour.

Step 1: Calm the patient

A patient with a problem may initially be upset and may be expecting a defensive approach by the optometrist. The optometrist must therefore re-assure them that their complaint is real and will be taken seriously. The optometrist must also make it clear that it is their intention to find a solution.

Step 2: Ask questions

The patient's description of the problem may not give sufficient clues as to the cause. They are likely to use terms that may be familiar to them, such as 'wonky' or 'fuzzy', but will not indicate the true nature of the problem. Questions, and, where appropriate, asking them to demonstrate the problem will help to isolate the cause.

PROBLEM SOLVING(CONT.)

Step 3: Listen actively and sift solutions

Reflective questions help to identify the real cause of the problem. Potential solutions will also present themselves as the cause of the problem is identified. One very useful reflective question is, “Is there anything you can do with your spectacles to make it better?” Often the patient will have tried moving the spectacles into different positions to see the effect.

Step 4: Recommend a solution

The optometrist must suggest a solution to the patient and seek their approval. If the recommended action does not meet the patient’s approval then it cannot be considered a solution and an alternative solution must be found.

Step 5: Carry out the solution

Once agreed upon, the recommended action must be carried out as quickly as possible.

Step 6: Follow up

Many practitioners follow up all patients after they have received their new spectacles or contact lenses. Some suggest that follow up is only necessary for first time wearers. Nevertheless, in a case of problem solving it is highly recommended that the patient be contacted to ensure that the solution was a success.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Written communication does not have the benefit of the nuances of face-to-face communication and therefore care must be taken to ensure that there are no unwanted connotations. This is the reason for the use of ‘emoticons’ such as ;-) in electronic messaging. They enable the writer to indicate comments made in jest and not meant to be taken literally.

In addition to considerations of the content of written communication, all written communication should be carefully checked before it is sent to ensure that there are no errors. Spelling and grammatical errors will adversely affect a practice’s image.

The most common forms of written communication within optometry practices are letters to patients or ophthalmologists, and emails. Written communication must be unambiguous, clear and easy to read and have no spelling or punctuation errors.

Business letters should always be proofread. It is not sufficient to rely on computerised spell checkers. For English language readers there are a few traps that will not be picked up by computerised spell checkers, such as the correct word in each of the following correctly spelt but quite different words:

- Discrete or discreet
- Formally or formerly
- Their, there or they’re
- To, two or too
- Affect or effect
- Its or it’s
- Whether or weather
- Principle or principal
- Stationary or stationery

Spell checkers will also miss subtle errors of usage, such as the use of ‘less’ instead of ‘fewer’. Less applies to quantities such as milk or water, while fewer relates to discrete numbers, such as cars or people. They also miss the use of similar sounding but incorrect words, such as ‘antidotal’ when ‘anecdotal’ was meant, or ‘pacific’ when ‘specific’ was meant.

SUMMARY

Marketing, selling and communication are essential skills in all businesses, including professional practices such as optometry. No matter how good an optometrist may be his/her practice will not be successful unless potential patients are made aware of what it has to offer.

SELF ASSESSMENT 4

1. **What are the three main types of questions?**
   a. _____
   b. _____
   c. _____

2. **What are the four Ps of marketing?**
   a. _____
   b. _____
   c. _____
   d. _____

3. **How might an optometrist deal with an introvert or an extrovert?**

4. **What are the steps in selling?**

ANSWERS – SELF ASSESSMENT 4

1. What are the three main types of questions?

a. Open-ended
b. Closed
c. Reflective

2. What are the four Ps of marketing?

a. Product
b. Place
c. Place
d. Promotion

3. How might an optometrist deal with an introvert or an extrovert?

The optometrist may need to encourage them and have plenty of patience when dealing with introverts. They need to be handled sensitively and guided in their decision making. By contrast, the extrovert may need to be kept on task. They will often stray into irrelevant conversations.

4. What are the steps in selling?

- The approach
- The presentation
- Overcoming objections
- Closing the sale