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Community Pharmacy Marketing: Strategies for Success

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Keywords: community pharmacy services, marketing of health services

Abstract

Purpose: As community pharmacies are implementing increasingly more clinical services they are faced with a new challenge of marketing these services. This article discusses The Ohio State University College of Pharmacy Clinical Partners Program's (Clinical Partners) experiences in marketing clinical services to patients, barriers encountered through these experiences, and presents suggestions for future marketing of services.

Experience: Clinical Partners developed two targeted marketing projects and evaluated impact on patient enrollment in services. In January 2008, the pharmacy ran a series of radio advertisements, newspaper print advertisements, and face to face marketing in the community with the focus of each being patient care services. During this project five individuals expressed interest in Clinical Partners' services. Four indicated that they heard about Clinical Partners through the radio ad and one through the pharmacy website, though none chose to enroll in services. In 2009 Clinical Partners focused on marketing MTM in the form of a comprehensive medication review to current patients already enrolled in its anticoagulation management service. Following a three month period, 6 patients (8%) of the 71 patients receiving the marketing intervention chose to enroll in MTM. Four additional patients have enrolled in MTM since conclusion of the project.

Discussion: These projects and a review of available literature revealed barriers that pharmacies encounter when marketing clinical services to patients in an outpatient setting including patients' unawareness of the role a pharmacist can play outside dispensing medications, patients' belief they do not need clinical services, and patients' unwillingness to pay a pharmacist out of pocket for services.

Future Implications: To overcome these identified challenges, community pharmacies should consider integration of marketing techniques such as tailoring marketing to a target population, forming and utilizing relationships with patients, and looking to past marketing successes in developing marketing plans. Pharmacists should also be adventurous in exploring new ways to promote pharmacy clinical services to find creative solutions to barriers encountered. As community pharmacies continue to grow the realm of clinical services offered to patients, it is important also to develop and implement marketing strategies to support the services and expansion of the profession so that these services can be embraced by patients and the health care community.

Introduction

Community pharmacies have been increasingly implementing clinical services by diversifying their practice sites and defining their roles as part of the health care team.¹ In order for a clinical service to be considered a success within a business environment, it must not only be implemented but also successfully marketed to patients so that the service can enroll patients, have positive outcomes, and become profitable. Community pharmacies have traditionally been

involved with the successful marketing of products; however, the marketing of a service to patients presents a new challenge for many pharmacists. Few articles have been published discussing experiences and related outcomes with service marketing for community pharmacies, although there are several descriptive articles sharing concepts on how to approach this challenge. The purpose of this article is to discuss The Ohio State University College of Pharmacy Clinical Partners Program's (Clinical Partners) experiences in marketing clinical services to patients, discuss barriers encountered through these experiences, and presents suggestions for future marketing of services.

Clinical Partners, established in 1996 by The Ohio State University College of Pharmacy, is a pharmacist-managed clinic located in Columbus, Ohio. The pharmacy is a licensed consulting pharmacy that offers a variety of pharmacist

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clinical services to the community through face to face direct patient care and does not dispense medications. Four pharmacy faculty members and a clinical pharmacist provide services at the pharmacy as well as a PGY1 ambulatory/community care pharmacy resident and students in experiential education. Disease management services include diabetes self management and anticoagulation management (AMS). The pharmacy offers wellness and prevention services including cardiovascular risk reduction, tobacco cessation, and biometric health screenings. Comprehensive medication reviews and specialty pharmacy medication services are also offered as a service to patients. These services are provided as a benefit for employees and staff and to the local community for fee for service consistent with national rates.

Clinical Partners' Marketing Strategies

Clinical Partners has worked to study the impact of various techniques used to market the pharmacy's direct patient care services to potential patients in efforts to grow the pharmacy's business to increase the volume of patient visits as well as to explore financially effective methods of marketing to the community. Based on suggestions in pharmacy literature as well as utilizing media traditionally employed by pharmacies for product marketing, the pharmacy developed targeted marketing projects to evaluate for impact on patient enrollment in services.

In January 2008, the pharmacy ran a series of radio advertisements, newspaper print advertisements, and face to face marketing in the community with the focus of each being patient care services. Clinical Partners worked with a radio station to develop a unique 30 second advertisement focusing on Medication Therapy Management services (MTM) that ran at least once daily between 4-6am or 8pm-12am on weekdays through the month of January. The scheduling of the radio advertisements on a local AM radio station targeted adults ages 35-64 and was based on achieving optimal frequency while staying within the limited funding of \$1000 budgeted to the project. The second method of advertising involved print advertisements focused on MTM, diabetes, and hypertension management with a coupon for five dollars off a pharmacy service. The pharmacy utilized a budget of \$250 to publish the print advertisement during two separate weeks in January in two local newspapers. Face to face marketing in the community was conducted at a local health and wellness event targeting seniors and retirees called "The 50+ Expo". Clinical Partners allotted \$250 for marketing at the event and provided free blood glucose screenings, as well provided free pill boxes, promotional materials, and face to face marketing of pharmacy services through interactions with fair attendees.

An evaluation of these efforts through tracking new patients visiting the pharmacy was conducted through the end of April. Five individuals expressed interest in Clinical Partners' services; however, none of the five chose to enroll in services and no coupons were redeemed. Four clients indicated that they heard about Clinical Partners through the radio ad and one client found Clinical Partners through the pharmacy website. All five callers reported interest in MTM while one caller also reported interest in the cardiovascular risk reduction service. Four callers stated they were calling for information for themselves while one caller was calling for a parent.

In 2009 Clinical Partners focused on marketing MTM in the form of a comprehensive medication review to patients already enrolled in its anticoagulation management service (AMS). A chart review of all 91 patients enrolled in AMS indicated that 79 would qualify for MTM based on one of the following criteria: current medication for the treatment of diabetes, hyperlipidemia, or hypertension, or a current medication list consisting of four or more medications. The pharmacy utilized personal selling to deliver a face to face verbal marketing intervention to all eligible patients during their regularly scheduled AMS appointment. In addition, each patient received a brochure describing in more depth the services offered at Clinical Partners. Two weeks following the initial personal selling marketing campaign, each eligible patient was mailed a postcard. This direct selling with the postcard included a discount for MTM conducted at Clinical Partners. Marketing was conducted over a three month period and at the conclusion of the marketing effort, the number of patients enrolling in MTM was recorded. A follow-up call to all patients, regardless of their decision to enroll, was then conducted to survey patients as to what factors influenced them to enroll or not enroll in the available services. Of the 79 patients who qualified, 71 ultimately received the marketing intervention. Following a three month period, 6 patients (8%) chose to enroll in MTM. The follow up phone call survey was completed with 55 patients overall. The marketing research revealed that of the patients who chose not to enroll, 26 cited the belief that these services were already provided to them by a doctor's office and another 18 patients felt these services were unnecessary.

Marketing Limitations

Evaluation of these project results provide lessons learned when considering future marketing of clinical services. In the first project where radio advertisements, newspaper print advertisements, and face to face marketing were used to target patients for clinical services, no patients enrolled in clinical services. Limitations to the marketing pursued in the project included a small budget which resulted in radio

advertisements not running at peak listening times, newspaper advertisements only running for a short period of time, and involvement in only one community health fair. The second project targeting current patients with a face to face marketing for MTM did result in a small number of patients enrolling in MTM. A possible major limitation to this project was cost for patients during a national economic recession at a time when the pharmacy was not able to bill Medicare or other payors for MTM.

Barriers in Marketing Clinical Services in the Community Pharmacy

These projects revealed barriers that pharmacists encounter when marketing clinical services to patients in an outpatient setting. One challenge pharmacists face is patients' unawareness of the role a pharmacist can play in the healthcare team outside of dispensing medications.² A 2005 study using a survey to evaluate consumer receptiveness to non-traditional roles for community pharmacists found that less than half of patients believe a pharmacist is valuable in providing basic health services and only one-fifth of patients think pharmacists are valuable in working with other providers to manage care and medications for specific disease states.³ A related barrier to marketing services is the patients' belief that they do not need clinical services such as MTM.⁴ In Clinical Partners' project involving face to face marketing, the follow up phone call revealed that of the patients who chose not to enroll, most did not because they felt that these services were already provided to them by a doctor's office or the services were unnecessary. A majority of patients do not understand what MTM is, how the service may benefit them, and/or how a pharmacist is specifically equipped to provide these services, which are significant challenges to marketing services.²

Another frequently identified barrier to marketing clinical services is patients' unwillingness to pay a pharmacist out of pocket for these services. In the previously mentioned 2005 survey, over half of patients indicated unwillingness to pay pharmacists for services.³ Though some patients are willing to provide payment to pharmacists for services, it is important that patients believe in the value of services provided by a community pharmacist.² When patients value a service, that value then translates to the expectation of a cost associated with a service.

The unique characteristics of clinical services present new barriers in marketing for pharmacies. The challenges encountered in these projects and in the marketing of clinical services in community pharmacies across the country can be intimidating and limiting for pharmacists; however, there are

several marketing techniques pharmacists can use to overcome these barriers.

Methods and Ideas to Overcome Marketing Barriers

Though the marketing of clinical services presents new challenges, community pharmacists have a successful history of marketing products and customer service to patients. A great method of transitioning to marketing of clinical services is to use marketing methods that have worked successfully for the pharmacy in the past such as in the marketing of products.⁵ Historically, community pharmacies have used a variety of promotional techniques for products including prescription bag stuffers, billboards, television advertisements, and participating in local health fairs. Though marketing of services presents unique challenges, using past successful experiences as a guide, pharmacies may be able to market clinical services with similar marketing formats and thus create effective marketing for their specific population of patients. In a survey of grocery store patrons, the preferred methods of advertising for pharmacy services identified were grocery store ads, in-store signs, and prescription bag flyers, all of which may be considered traditional promotional methods utilized by pharmacies.⁶ If a pharmacy has an established method of marketing working successfully, taking advantage of that method and transferring it to the marketing of services is a cost effective way to approach service marketing with less risk involved. Examples of other common strategies used to market products in the pharmacy environment that can be applied to services include taking advantage of trends to create displays, utilizing store traffic engineering to provide more interaction with the patient and the services available, and making good impressions on patients by training the staff to be approachable and friendly.⁷

Another marketing strategy that can be used to overcome barriers to patient enrollment in services is taking the unique pharmacist-patient relationship and advancing this relationship to a marketing opportunity. When a product is marketed, a customer relationship forms from both the seller and buyer being invested in the product. When marketing services, there is a need to form a closer type of relationship with the patient so that both parties buy into the service, creating value in the service.⁸ To form this joint buy in from both parties, pharmacists should listen and engage patients during pharmacy visits, identify unmet healthcare needs, and present services during these encounters.⁹ Pharmacists should market services using patient friendly language, take time to explain what services are, give patients realistic expectations of the service, and have a plan of how to meet these expectations.^{10,4} Many pharmacies already successfully use one or all of these techniques in various aspects of their

everyday provision of care to patients. Taking these principles used in developing and maintaining the patient care relationship and adapting them into a marketing plan can grow the pharmacist-patient relationship and give patients opportunities to understand the value of and gain benefit from engaging in additional pharmacy care services.

Targeting specific patient populations who have a need for a service is an effective way to focus marketing efforts on a group that may be more likely to respond. For example, Kennedy et al describe a community pharmacy that implemented a smoking cessation clinic and tried various marketing techniques. A method that was found very successful was reviewing patient profiles for disease states that could be tied to tobacco use and targeting this specific group for marketing contacts.¹¹ Pharmacists can use several readily available tools including listening to patients' comments and feedback, utilizing computerized dispensing records, and conducting patient surveys to help identify a target group.¹² By focusing on a select group of patients, the pharmacy can research and identify differences in the group from the general population to then target marketing specifically towards this group.^{13, 14}

Relationship marketing is another important marketing strategy, which targets specific patients who could benefit from services for marketing based upon developing and maintaining a relationship between the pharmacist and patient.¹⁰ This method ties together the two previous mentioned strategies of the pharmacist-patient relationship and targeting a specific group of patients. In relationship marketing, the focus of each interaction between the patient and pharmacist or between the pharmacist and other healthcare providers about a patient's care is to build this relationship.¹³ To use this strategy, a pharmacy should look at their existing population of patients to assess their patients' current needs and find a specific group to focus marketing efforts on. Once a need is found, pharmacists should work to develop targeted relationships with these patients by focusing more on the patient's long-term relationship with the pharmacy than a specific transaction between the two parties. By establishing this relationship, patients receive an increased level of care from a trusted provider and may, in turn, display increased loyalty to the pharmacy.¹³ During the Clinical Partners' project involving marketing of MTM to AMS patients, relationship marketing was the basis of each marketing encounter. The marketing research after the project revealed that, though only a small number of patients chose to enroll in the service, all of the patients who chose to enroll in MTM made this decision based on the conversation they had during their regularly scheduled AMS appointment. When comparing the two Clinical Partners' projects, utilizing

relationship marketing to market services to existing patients was a more effective marketing tool for patient enrollment in MTM than utilizing advertisement media to recruit new patients. Since the end of data collection for the marketing project, the pharmacy has had four additional AMS patients enroll in MTM as well as AMS patients enrolling other services including tobacco cessation, diabetes self management education, and cardiovascular risk reduction. Relationship marketing is cost-effective for the pharmacy because the pharmacy does not have to employ promotional advertisements to attract new patients. By creating loyal patients, the potential for word-of-mouth recommendations increases as well. This cost-saving benefit through relationship marketing can be passed along to the patients by various methods such as decreased fees for service or offering of additional services.¹³

Community pharmacies may also consider taking part in local and national pharmacy and disease state promotional campaigns and community events as a way to educate patients on the clinical services pharmacists can offer. Utilizing opportunities such as American Pharmacists Month or American Diabetes Month allows pharmacists to educate patients on the role of the pharmacist beyond the dispensing of medications. While national campaigns can play a role in influencing public opinion on the role of a pharmacist, pharmacies getting involved at the local level can teach patients not only what pharmacists are qualified to do, but also specifically what their local community pharmacy can offer them in the way of clinical services. While no patients enrolled as result of the one-time health fair marketing event in 2008, since this time Clinical Partners has looked for other opportunities to develop community relationships to market its services. One such partnership in which Clinical Partners has become involved is a local cardiac rehabilitation group where pharmacists and student pharmacists provide patients with a discussion of cardiac medications every 6 weeks. As a result of these educational discussions, the pharmacy has had several patients from this group enroll for MTM consultations at Clinical Partners.

Pharmacists may look additionally into incorporating technology and nontraditional ideas into the marketing of services. Utilizing the internet is a way of marketing clinical services that can potentially reach a large number of patients. In the first Clinical Partners project using radio ads, newspaper advertisements, and health fair advertising, of the five patients interested in MTM at Clinical Partners, one expressed interest after finding information on the Clinical Partners website. Though the website was not part of the marketing project, it did serve as a tool for generating patient interest. Pharmacies should incorporate patient-friendly

materials explaining their clinical services on their websites for both current patients and patients who are searching the internet looking for health care answers. Social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter are also potential advertising forums for pharmacies to take advantage of to connect with and market services to current and prospective patients. With the growth of social media sites, marketers have found that many businesses are utilizing this new forum to successfully reach out to customers, increase business exposure, and help the business stand out.¹⁵ It is also important for pharmacies to get creative with their advertising campaigns to better reach the targeted marketing population. In one example, a hospital system used banner advertising. The hospital ran small strip advertisements in newspapers that were in an eye-catching design along with television split screen banner advertisements with simple health related messages and the phone number of the hospital as a way to increase the amount of time the advertisement was shown, without having to invest more funding into the marketing campaign. This method was successful, bringing about an increase in the database of prospective patients for the hospital.¹⁶ This is a method pharmacies could use to build the reputation of the pharmacy in the community and get patients in the store for further individualized marketing encounters.

While the focus of this paper is on marketing clinical services to patients, working with outside entities is another vital strategy that should not be ignored by pharmacists. Physician referrals are a major source of patient enrollment in Clinical Partners' AMS and are something the pharmacy is working to utilize to further enroll patients for other services offered such as diabetes self management and tobacco cessation by marketing services to physician offices by distributing marketing materials, providing medical education, and in-services. There is a need for education about the roles a pharmacist can play and the value of the services provided not only to the patient population, but also to other health care providers, the public, and payors.² Incorporating marketing to these other parties into the pharmacy's plan is also an important part in the successful marketing of clinical services.

Future Marketing Plans

Clinical Partners is working to take some of the lessons learned from these two marketing projects and incorporate them into future marketing plans. As the pharmacy develops new services and strengthens existing services, marketing techniques are being planned to try and increase the success of the services offered. These include working with a newly hired marketing and communications resource in the College of Pharmacy to develop patient friendly advertising for the clinic, incorporating relationship marketing of new services to current patients, and targeting specific patients with disease states and qualities that can benefit most from services. Clinical Partners is also working to improve the pharmacy's website to provide better information to patients, taking steps to build and strengthen relationships with local health care providers and community organizations, and taking part in pharmacy and health promotional campaigns.

Conclusion

Community pharmacies have struggled with the marketing of clinical services to patients and not much research has been done to determine successful models of marketing for these services. These two projects offered some insight into what barriers pharmacists are facing with the marketing of services and suggest ideas on how to overcome those challenges. It is important for community pharmacists to consider integration of marketing techniques such as tailoring marketing to a target population, forming and utilizing relationships with patients, and looking to past marketing successes in developing marketing plans. A marketing plan should be purposefully and continually developed to be part of the pharmacy's routine processes and be incorporated into the workflow of the pharmacy.¹⁹ Pharmacists should also be adventurous in exploring new ways to promote pharmacy clinical services to find creative solutions to barriers encountered. As community pharmacists continue to grow the realm of clinical services offered to patients, it is important also to develop and implement marketing strategies to support the services and expansion of the profession so that these services can be embraced by patients and the health care community.

Table 1

Barriers to Marketing Clinical Services in the Community Pharmacy	Methods and Ideas to Overcome Marketing Barriers in the Community Pharmacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patients’ unawareness of role pharmacist can play outside dispensing medications¹ • Patients’ belief they do not need clinical services² • Patients’ unwillingness to pay a pharmacist out of pocket for services³ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize methods of advertising that have worked successfully for the pharmacy in the past marketing of products if applicable⁴ • Expand the pharmacist-patient relationship into a marketing opportunity • Target specific patient populations who have a need for the service⁵ • Develop relationship marketing⁶ • Take part in local and national pharmacy and disease state promotional campaigns • Incorporate new innovative marketing ideas

¹ Law AV, Okamoto MP, Brock K. Perceptions of Medicare Part D enrollees about pharmacists and their roles as providers of medication therapy management. *J Am Pharm Assoc* 2008; 48(5): 648-653.

² Garcia GM, Snyder ME, Harriman McGrath S, Smith RB, Somma McGivney M. Generating demand for pharmacist-provided medication therapy management: Identifying patient-preferred marketing strategies. *J Am Pharm Assoc* 2009; 49(5): 611-616.

³ Tootelian DH, Rolston LW, Negrete MJ. Consumer receptiveness to non-traditional roles for community pharmacists. *Health Mark Q* 2005; 23(1): 43-56.

⁴ Rodis JL, Thomas RA. Stepwise approach to developing point-of-care testing services in the community/ambulatory pharmacy setting. *J Am Pharm Assoc* 2006; 46(5): 594-604.

⁵ Kennedy DT, Small RE. Development and implementation of a smoking cessation clinic in community pharmacy practice. *J Am Pharm Assoc* 2002; 42(1): 83-92.

⁶ Doucette WR, McDonough RP. Beyond the 4Ps: using relationship marketing to build value and demand for pharmacy services. *J Am Pharm Assoc* 2002; 42(2); 183-194.

Table 2

Resources on Marketing of Clinical Services in the Community Pharmacy ¹
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Marketing for Pharmacists</i> by David A. Holdford • “Becoming ‘indispensable’: developing innovative community pharmacy practices” in <i>Journal of the American Pharmacists Association</i> by David P. Willink and Brian J. Isetts • “Using relationship marketing to expand pharmacy services” available on pharmacist.com reviewed by Randy McDonough • “Using personal selling skills to promote pharmacy services” in <i>Journal of the American Pharmacists Association</i> by Randal P. McDonough and William R. Doucette • “Beyond the 4Ps: using relationship marketing to build value and demand for pharmacy services” in <i>Journal of the American Pharmacists Association</i> by William R. Doucette and Randal P. McDonough • <i>Building a Successful Collaborative Pharmacy Practice: Guidelines and Tools</i> by Marialice Bennett and Jody Jacobson Wedret • <i>Marketing Your Professional Services</i> by Michael T. Rupp and Sondra J. Peters

¹ See references 13, 8, 12, 9, 10, 16, 17

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