Carefully crafted treatment programs are imperative for a behavioral healthcare organization. But without effective marketing, new patients might not even know your facility exists. To say marketing is crucial might be an understatement.

Marketing is an essential part of a behavioral healthcare facility’s business plan and can be used to: attract new patients, gain support of referring clinicians, or establish a reputation within the community. But implementation can be a daunting task.

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The options to market a facility in today’s healthcare environment are diverse, ranging from traditional print ads to social media profiles, email campaigns and networking, but regardless of how facilities choose to go about the process, experts agree that honesty and integrity are paramount. Above all, programs should follow a code of ethics in marketing—either ones they create themselves or the policy created by the National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers.

Experts say there are methods to make sure marketing messages are effective, cost conscious and ultimately reach their intended audience.

1. Put Your Plan into Words

The best way to begin is with a plan. While it seems elementary, too many organizations fail to draft a big-picture strategy.

Writing out a marketing plan, even if it’s only a single page, can help treatment centers think about what messages they are trying to send and who they are trying to reach. Begin by organizing your thoughts.

Lisa Nickerson Bucklin, director of marketing for Father Martin’s Ashley, says an effective plan should define the intended recipient of any marketing efforts, what the facility wants those target recipients to know about who they are and the services they offer and how they help their patients.

“Once you’ve answered those questions, then that will help you zero in on the best media to use, the best vehicles and the best strategies and tactics to help you achieve your objectives,” Bucklin says.

The marketing plan can guide all future marketing efforts and can help marketing professionals determine where and how to spend their money.

“Don’t do random things,” Bucklin says. “Do things as part of a campaign.”
For instance, Bucklin says she avoids buying random, remnant advertising space—even if it comes with a steep discount—because often those unsolicited opportunities don’t correspond with the facility’s overall marketing goals. Instead, she recommends developing a set of criteria derived directly from the marketing plan to vet potential advertising opportunities, guide social media efforts and help direct staff members’ time.

### 2. Research Your Audience

Once behavioral healthcare centers have identified who they want to reach with their marketing efforts, experts say the next step is learning about where those target groups can be reached—whether it’s through certain publications or websites, social media channels, conferences or community events.

“One of the ways you can start narrowing down the best marketing tools for your agency is to look at who your clientele is and who your referral audience is,” says Ramona Cruz-Peters, senior director of marketing and communications for Austin Recovery and The Council on Alcohol and Drugs Houston.

Knowing more about your desired audience can help treatment facilities decide where they can make the biggest impact with the money and manpower available to devote to marketing. To learn more about who your target audience is and where they go for information, Bucklin suggests surveying your audience.

“I am a firm believer in audience research, but it doesn’t necessarily have to be hiring a market research firm and doing $50,000 worth of focus groups,” she says. “Things like SurveyMonkey and easy to implement email and online surveys to your constituents can yield good insights about where they go for information because not all audiences are the same.”

She says centers can also partner with conference organizers to gather information, such as with surveys in conference booths, or a lunch or a roundtable to get insights about audience habits.

In terms of social media, Cruz-Peters says there is research available that shows which social networks reach which types of audiences. While most
healthcare facilities don’t have the resources to populate all avenues of social media on a regular basis, carefully selecting the ones more commonly used by your target audiences will help yield the best results.

### 3. Get Your Own House in Order

While marketing staff might often be focused on reaching out to the community, experts say good marketing often begins inside the facility itself, for example, by making sure all messaging and branding is consistent, ensuring team members are on the same page or even making sure patients at the treatment center have a positive experience.

“First, you have to have your own house in order,” says Baney.

Baney says behavioral healthcare centers need to make sure there is continuity in their messaging with all the company’s communications and website before marketing the facility to the outside world. He also advises not to market your services too early or to try to oversell your facility by highlighting a vision or services that have yet to become reality.

“It’s easy to get caught up,” he says. “You know what your vision is. You know what you want to be when you grow up, but if you are not there yet, but you are acting like and talking like you are there, that is professional suicide.”

Once messaging is consistent, Bucklin says, staff members outside of the marketing department also need to be part of the process. She suggests creating a short “elevator speech” that highlights what the organization does and what it wants to portray to the public. The speech will help staff members hone in on key messages when talking with the public.

“There is nothing worse than having your lead psychiatrist doing a tour for some visiting psychiatrists and saying absolutely completely different stuff than what you are saying in your marketing materials or on your website, or even worse, something contrary to what you want people to think about you,” she says.

Behavioral healthcare facilities also shouldn’t forget to market to existing patients and their families by polishing the messages they are exposed to.
during their stay, surveying patients on their satisfaction with the facility, and planning follow-up communications with either the family, referent or the patients themselves.

“In our case, 25 percent to 30 percent of our patients come from alumni recommendations, and that’s huge,” Bucklin says.

### 4. Embrace Social Media

Social media outlets have become an everyday part of people’s lives, and Cruz-Peters says if behavioral healthcare centers want to stay relevant, they need to be a part of social media too.

“No matter what industry, the people that we are trying to reach are online,” she says. “And a significant chunk of them are utilizing social media.”

The best way to start a social media marketing strategy, she says, is to take advantage of free resources online by reading white papers on social media strategies, attending free webinars and following other similar facilities.

“What we’ve got to remember with this kind of marketing is we are not really competing for the same fans and followers,” she says. “We are really trying to find people who identify with us, whether it’s because they are familiar with our services, or they are in our particular area, or they just care a lot about the kind of work that we do.”

She says looking at what other savvy organizations are doing on social media can help facilities get ideas to emulate or link to on their own site.

“You learn a lot just by watching others,” she says.

She also recommends you avoid using an intern or volunteer to be in charge of your social media presence. The person who is doing your social media marketing is a spokesperson for your whole facility and for your brand, she says. It’s not a role suitable for someone who is new to your team. Rather, she recommends choosing someone trustworthy who has a deep understanding of the center’s mission and can be a voice for the organization.
5. Take Charge of Review Sites

These days consumers often turn to popular review sites such as Yelp or Citysearch when they are shopping around for services. Behavioral healthcare facilities should be active on these review sites too, not only to keep their pulse on public opinion but also to be part of the online discussion.

Cruz-Peters says as a business leader, you can take ownership of online review profiles by obtaining a login which allows you to update correct business information, add photos, highlight areas of specialty or include a logo. But perhaps more importantly, it also allows you to respond to reviews.

“We respond to every single review that we get—good and bad,” Cruz-Peters says.

While consumers are more likely to report on a negative experience rather than a positive experience, Cruz-Peters says negative reviews don’t necessarily have to be a kiss of death. Instead, they can be an opportunity for businesses to respond in a positive manner that prevents the conversation from being one-sided.

She suggests responding to a negative review by thanking the commenter for their feedback, acknowledging their feelings, publically addressing any issues that may need to be addressed and then ending the review by offering someone’s contact information for follow-up on the situation.

“My cardinal rule with responses to reviews, especially negative ones, is that you cannot get defensive,” she says. “If you get defensive, you are opening yourself up to a very public and negative debate.”

6. Back Your Plan with Cash

It’s easy for facilities to get excited about their programs, their interior designs or their therapists, but Baney says, an easy mistake to make is underestimating the amount of money it takes to execute effective marketing and business development.
“That’s really the downfall of a lot of startups: they put a lot of their budget into the program and/or the start-up costs, including the therapies, the equipment and all of that, but they forget to put enough money into the development of the business,” he says.

He says startups should expect to spend 25 percent to 30 percent of their budget on marketing and business development, while established facilities can expect to spend closer to 15 percent.

“The heaviest cost for marketing and business development is on the front end, obviously, but if people don’t know you exist, they are not going to call you. And that’s the truth. If they don’t recognize you as a viable resource they are not going to access your services,” he says.

7. Create Relationships

Behavioral healthcare is a business centered on relationships, and according to Baney, it’s never too soon to build your community presence.

“Certainly if you are a startup, in the very first 12 to 18 months you should try to be at as many networking events as are on the calendar and try to physically get to as many behavioral health conferences as you can,” he says.

Establishing relationships—whether it’s with families, clients or referring healthcare professionals—helps cement your reputation as a viable resource in the community.

“It’s really about creating awareness in the community, and I am talking about not just the local community, but the regional and national community as well, and depending on what kind of resource you are, even internationally,” he says.

8. Time It Right

Knowing just how often to send out email blasts, post an ad or drive your social media can be impossible to predict, but experts say there are ways to ensure your message is heard without becoming a nuisance.
When it comes to advertisements, Bucklin uses the rule of threes: the same ad should run at least three times in a channel to make sure the message is seen and heard.

“If that medium is worth being in, then it’s worth being in it in the right way and with an effective level, or don’t be in it at all,” she says.

To be effective, she says, avoid doing one-time ads or ads that are spaced too far apart, whether they are online or in a print channel. She also suggests consistent messaging, so the content of the ads does not need to be changed constantly.

“We will get bored with our messaging far sooner than the audience will because we’re looking at it all the time, and they aren’t,” she says. “You don’t want things that are contrary. Trading up an ad every week or every month or changing banners constantly isn’t as effective as sticking with one thing and driving that home for awhile.”

Experts agree that direct online marketing is still an effective tool, however, they say there are a few ways behavioral healthcare facilities can make sure email campaigns aren’t so saturated that they lose the intended audience. In other words, avoid becoming “spam” in the eyes of your audience.

Cruz-Peters says one way she tries not to overburden people is by splitting her email list into interest groups. So when people sign up to receive emails, they can also choose what they want to receive, whether it’s a monthly newsletter, information about alumni association events, the center’s celebrity speaker series or continuing education opportunities for healthcare professionals.

“The numbers do show that when you have your mailing list sorted by interest, and you target your communications appropriately your unsubscribe ratio goes down, so you are going to have fewer people unsubscribing if they get relevant information only,” she says.

As a best practice, she won’t send more than one email a week to each email list.
9. Monitor the Landscape

For facilities that make social media a priority, Cruz-Peters says paid monitoring services could be a good investment. Such services allow facilities to sign up to receive daily alerts on all the facility’s mentions on social media as well as mentions in the news. Free services might include automatic search engine alerts or frequent, manual searches on Google, Bing or other sites.

“We do so much online, and there is a good amount of online conversation about us because of it. It would be almost impossible for us to monitor everything that’s being said,” she says.

She says the service has been a considerable time saver for her and also gives her an opportunity to join in on online discussion.

“You have a chance to set the record straight, you have a chance to even be the host of that conversation,” she says.

10. Optimize Your Ability to Rank High in Search Engines

With more consumers searching online for treatment facilities, it’s important to make your site visible. Branding, marketing and having a good web presence creates the right foundation, but search engine optimization (SEO) is what will drive eyes to your website from the search tools.

What is SEO? It’s the practice of influencing the visibility and ranking of a website in the results of an online search engine, such as Google or Bing, for example. Keywords, images, the behind-the-scenes meta data and a slew of other variables all contribute to higher search engine rankings and better visibility by potential patients and their family members.
BONUS: Q&A on SEO

David Blenk, Vice President of Gateway Rehabilitation Center, a drug and alcohol treatment facility, says site visibility and SEO implementation strategies can provide measurable successes.

Q What is Gateway Rehab’s search engine optimization strategy?

A Gateway Rehab’s strategy is “be found first.” That means we work day-in and day-out on SEO to stay at the top of the search results in the area of substance-abuse treatment in our region.

Q What advice do you have?

A Invest in the best expert services you can afford and make sure they are Google certified. Remember, how your organization ranks on a search engine will definitely affect how people are going to find you. Also keep in mind that the variables that influence search-engine ranking are numerous and tend to change frequently. The funds we spend on SEO are among the most effective dollars we spend in the communications budget.

Q What strategies have you implemented?

A We focus on keywords, meta tags, content, backlinks, directory inclusion and location verification. Because we have two websites—gatewayrehab.org and nkrc.org, which is the website for Gateway Rehab’s Ohio subsidiary, the Neil Kennedy Recovery Clinic—we had a fair amount of editing to do so that the sites wouldn’t mirror each other word for word. If we hadn’t undertaken the rewriting, we would have been dinged by the search engines.

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**Q** How much traffic do you see?

**A** In our latest report in September 2014 for gatewayrehab.org, total organic traffic increased both year-over-year and month-over-month. Since last year, organic traffic has improved 13 percent. Monthly visits increased 9 percent with 9.2 percent more page views.

The average time users spent on the site increased by 7 seconds for an average time spent on site of 2 minutes and 15 seconds. There are 13 keywords that had Gateway Rehab ranked on Google’s page 1 in September.

**Q** What are your next steps?

**A** You can’t think of Search Engine Optimization in a silo or as a one-time project. Many factors affect rankings and you have to keep after them every day. In Gateway Rehab’s case, one of our next steps will be to optimize our site across all readers: PC, tablet and smartphone. This will not only make for a better experience for our web visitors, but because we will have everything in one [template]—rather than a standard site and a mobile site—it should increase our total visits, which should influence search engine rankings.
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