

Intentional Branding: Establishing a Foundation for Effective Marketing

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Let's play a word association game. As quickly as you can, think of a brand for each of the following products or services: *coffee, running shoes, laundry detergent, rental car, mortgage company, bookseller, blue jeans*. I'd wager that at least half the names that popped into your mind within a matter of seconds were Starbucks, Nike, Tide, Hertz, Countrywide, Amazon and Levis. Here's another association exercise. What comes to mind when you hear the names Oprah, Bono, Martha, Tiger and Homer? Chances are you can see the faces of these individuals and have an opinion about what their celebrity represents.

Imagine how much easier your marketing efforts would be if *your name* popped into the minds of potential patients when they thought about concepts like chiropractor, sports injury, wellness, back pain, headache, stress reduction or nutrition. Consider the benefits of being known as the chiropractor for seniors, elite athletes, Hispanics, executives, or moms and their kids. You're not a Fortune 500 company, but that doesn't mean you cannot or should not have a brand. In fact, you probably already have one. The question is whether your brand is intentional or haphazard. The difference between an intentional brand and a haphazard one is the difference between Starbucks and the neighborhood coffee shop people visit, but can't describe or even name.

Branding Defined

Branding, the foundation for all marketing, is not just a logo or series of advertisements. It's more than a catchy practice name or the fact that your employees dress in identical sporty outfits. Your brand is [how the world sees your practice](#). It's how patients perceive the likelihood that you will meet or exceed their expectation of a quality experience and positive, valuable outcomes. A successful brand not only appeals to what patients need and want, but also inspires the confidence that helps them make the decision to use your services. Your brand should convey to patients that you - rather than the chiropractor across town, the physical therapist or acupuncturist across the street, or the orthopedist in the adjacent medical complex- have what it takes to make them feel better and improve the quality of their life.

Branding is a comprehensive strategy, not a single tactic or even a few tactics pieced together. It is a collection of factors that set up expectations on the part of patients, some of which include the name of your practice, the design of your logo, advertising, signage, collateral materials and Web site. These brand elements help someone initially decide to choose you. Once a patient is in your office, your brand should be consistent in terms of the ambience and decor of your space and how your staff interacts with one another, with you and with patients. And finally, you must offer an expression of your brand with your interpersonal and clinical skills: how you listen and communicate, your level of empathy, the way you deliver information and treatment, and the outcomes your patients experience (and hopefully speak about to others). If a patient has a "disconnect" anywhere along this continuum of

care, they will - consciously or subconsciously - question or distrust your authenticity, sincerity and professionalism.

Branding Before Marketing

Most chiropractors enjoy connecting with patients to educate, deliver care, and guide them toward improved health and well-being. What most don't enjoy is the work necessary to attract new patients so they can do the work they love: practice chiropractic. And perhaps the only thing doctors like less than marketing is selling. The good news is that [when you're properly branded](#), marketing becomes easier and selling is rarely necessary. Branding always precedes marketing, which always precedes selling. Because branding is the foundation of all marketing efforts, taking the time to be clear on your brand, and then leveraging and managing it well, is essential to practice success.

Evidence of a Strong Brand

Lacking a clear identity, you are perceived as being no different from any other chiropractor in your community. A successful brand strategy inspires patients to think of you first, make an initial appointment, listen to your advice and follow through with a treatment plan, become a loyal patient and refer others to your practice.

Here's an example of a chiropractor with a strong brand. "Dr. Dixon" is a lifelong athlete. Having played basketball in high school, she now runs, cycles, play tennis, is on a coed softball league and competes in an occasional triathlon. Everything in her office reflects her passion for athletics and taking care of athletes. The furniture is sturdy and casual, the photos and art on the walls and the magazines in the reception area are sports-related, and members of her staff are fit and healthy.

Dr. Dixon regularly volunteers at local sporting and athletic events, and her practice sponsors a youth soccer team. She writes an occasional column for her local paper on sports-injury prevention and treatment. Because she has such a clear brand and has positioned herself as "the" chiropractor for athletes at all levels, she spends very little time and money on practice promotion and almost never has to "sell" herself. Patients are sold on the value of her services before they pick up the phone to make their first appointment.

Identifying and Cultivating Your Brand

Your brand must be authentically aligned with whom you are at your core. You cannot create and cultivate a brand based on a foundation that does not match your personality, competencies and passion. We all know colleagues who, upon attending a weekend seminar, declare themselves a "corporate wellness coach" and put all their eggs into a basket they don't identify or feel comfortable carrying. Where you put your branding energy must be based on what is true for you, be valuable to your patients and help you build a sustainable practice. Your brand must also reflect the needs of your clientele. What are your ideal patients attracted to, emotionally and intellectually? What do they need and want? What resonates with them? As you consider your brand, ask yourself the following questions:

- What makes me and my practice unique?
- How well do my patients' experiences match their expectations?
- How and why am I relevant to patients?
- What do my ideal patients have in common?

- What does my staff know (and what can they say) about what my practice stands for?
- How well do my staff and my office setting convey my desired brand?
- What significant impact do I have on patients and my community?

Answering these questions will give you clues about how you are already perceived. If it turns out you are currently viewed in a way that is consistent with how you see yourself and with what you want for your practice, then your task is leveraging your brand with strategic marketing. If the way you are perceived *isn't* in alignment with who you feel you are and the value you believe you deliver, then your task is to define, clarify, develop and communicate a congruent identity.

Leverage and Manage Your Brand

Once you are clear on your brand and have the basic elements in place, it's time to work toward making the most of what you've created. Bearing in mind that your marketing activities should be in alignment with your values (otherwise, you won't follow through), find ways to become known for your brand. You may do this by actively participating in strategically selected community organizations, writing a column for your local paper or an e-mail newsletter for your patients, giving talks to associations in your town, or launching a high-quality advertising campaign. While you may never be in love with the practice-building process, once you have a foundation on which to stand (your brand), you will find it much easier to engage in marketing because your activities will be intentional.

Even the strongest brands need ongoing attention. Unlike a marketing activity that may have a duration of a few weeks or months, your brand should stand the test of time. But this does not mean that once it is established, your work is done. A brand isn't something you change on a whim or update every time you have a new idea; it is dynamic and should be updated as market conditions shift. Assess your brand periodically (perhaps during your annual strategic-planning retreat) to determine if it continues to accurately reflect your approach and provide a foundation for your marketing efforts.

Resist the temptation to deviate from your established brand. When you have a slow month or bad quarter and adopt a tactic to quickly drive your numbers back up, if that tactic is out of synch with your existing brand, you will do your practice damage in the long run, even if you have a temporary spike in patients. You risk attracting the wrong patients and throwing your entire marketing effort off track.

Your Brand Is Your Promise

Branding is about creating a perception; however, perceptions can change over time (or even on a dime). Health care consumers today are knowledgeable and have high expectations. They will compare their experiences with your brand promise at every turn. A slip-up or two might be overlooked, but beware of your service delivery (by you or your staff) getting out of synch with your brand promise. It is difficult to re-establish trust once a promise has been broken, so make it a priority to deliver on your brand promise consistently.

The brand you establish for your practice and hold out to the public is your promise about what patients can expect when they choose you as their health care provider. Part of why it is so important to carefully craft your brand is that once conveyed, it's up to you and your staff to live up to the promise. The success of a brand is based 20 percent on your creation and 80 percent on the experiences patients have and whether they feel their expectations are consistently met. In crafting your brand, by all means go for the gold, but don't hold yourself out to the world in such a lofty way

that you never be able to live up to the promise.

Work with your staff and the rest of your professional support team to better understand the value of branding. Take the necessary steps to build, represent, and protect your brand. Do this and marketing your practice will become less stressful and more successful

What Your Brand *Must* Do

- Convey that you are not only different, but also better.
- Be consistent and true to what you deliver.
- Appeal to emotions.
- Inspire confidence.
- Be authentic and aligned with your values
- Be believable (because if it sounds too good to be true...).
- Speak to the question of “What’s in it for me?” from the patient’s perspective.

12 Signs and Symptoms of an Unhealthy Brand

One way to determine whether you have a solid brand is by looking at the opposite side of the coin - what an unhealthy brand looks like. Are you suffering from any of these symptoms? If so, it’s time to diagnose and treat the problem.

- You’re unknown in your community.
- You’re known, but not how you’d like to be.
- Other chiropractors in your town get most of the name recognition and press.
- Patients balk at the cost of your services.
- You play “let’s make a deal” with certain patients on pricing.
- You attract the “wrong” patients and get low-quality referrals.
- The look and feel within your practice is inconsistent (e.g., your logo doesn’t match your signage).
- Your identity and design elements, though consistent, are stale or old-fashioned.
- Members of your staff cannot clearly state the benefits and value of your services.
- You use adjectives, lingo and hype when talking about your services.
- You don’t believe your own marketing message.
- You often feel like you have to coerce people into trying your services.

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