

POSITIONING HOSPITAL SERVICES (Compiled by Deep Banerjee, Marketingpundit.com)

It is said that marketing is just not a battle of products nor a battle of intellect of two competitors. It is definitely not a battle of superior and inferior. Contrary to whatever one might believe, it is a battle of **perceptions**.

Every professionally marketed product is seeking to occupy some place in the mind of the prospect. The aim of such a company is to sit at a place which is not occupied by any other brand. They are looking to create a perception for their product which is favourable and most importantly, which gets the prospect to buy their brand. Marketers call it positioning.

Positioning is somewhat of a mystery to the entrepreneurs owning and running small to medium hospitals. They are not to be blamed as most of them are doctors who have no idea of positioning in much the same way as a marketing professional who has no idea of interpreting a MRI plate. The curriculum the doctors study do not teach them anything about professional marketing. Now, marketing experts are making attempts to introduce the interested doctors and other professionals to this wonderful world of marketing, of which positioning is an integral part.

Most products in industry generally acquire a reputation on their own. The success, or the lack of it, will invariably be determined as to what its reputation is in terms of various parameters.

The parameters could include the following: How is your price perceived? How is your quality perceived? How is your technology perceived? How is your expertise perceived? How are your competitors perceived on the same parameters? How is the overall private health care industry perceived by the target market? The key word here is '**perceived**'.

What you think you are as a service provider is not as important as how you are perceived by the client. The challenge is to create a reputation for your services which is relevant and unique. Having only one of the two is not always very fruitful. A simple example would be of a hospital (let us call it Axz Hospital) which has a uniqueness in the form of having blue colour in most of its interiors, like furniture, etc.

Now this may be a unique thing, but the question is that is this uniqueness relevant? Does the customer really view colour combination of the hospital as an important factor. I guess not. So having this unique feature is not sufficient for Axz Hospital. It can continue with having the same colour combination, but it is not enough. On the contrary, Axz Hospital may have a very relevant feature. It may be having a very caring staff.

A staff that really cares for patients and is always cheerful, apart from being perfectly dressed. This uniqueness may also not work if the competitor hospitals also have a similar staff situation. The hospital, under no circumstances, can ignore the role of rendering excellent services to its patients but it will have to do something extra.

The following is a methodology for creating a fruitful positioning for a hospital in the mind of the prospect:

1. Get to know your customer inside out. Know everything about them. How much they earn? How much they save for their health? Where do they work? Where do they shop? What is their family size? etc. You must have a very detailed profile of your target customer.

2. The next step would be to find out what the various attributes in a hospital are which will lead to him or her using the services of the hospital. Find out what influences his/her purchase decision?

These attributes may be many in number. They may include: -

- Reliability
- Pricing
- Reputation of doctors
- Quality of equipment
- Number of supporting specialities
- Amount and quality of miscellaneous services like catering, housekeeping, etc.
- Distance from the house
- Recommendations from someone
- Who will pay for the treatment

3. After you determine what factors influence the 'purchase decision', the next step is to assign the priority to these factors. Some of the factors would have more influence than the others. So, it is very important to figure out which factors are most important. Let me illustrate this by giving an example. For hospital Axz, the target customers will view reliability as the most important factor.

This will be so because the hospital is located in an area which has nuclear families and hence, the small family size makes reliability an important factor. Another aspect which makes it an important factor is that Axz Hospital is doing cardiac surgeries which are perceived as a high risk task. Hence, reliability is of prime importance.

So out of 100, reliability as a factor which influences the purchase decision for the target customer of Axz Hospital is 42. The second important factor for the target customer is the quality of personal care a patient would get in the hospital. The weight assigned to this factor is 23. The remaining 35 weight is shared by distance, reputation of the doctor and prices. In the end we know what are the relevant attributes which the hospital can concentrate on.

4. The next step would be to find out which of the relevant attributes are being taken care of by the competition. Not only that, there may be a few relevant attributes that the competition or the industry as a whole is struggling to provide. The job for Axz Hospital is to find out what attributes it can provide which are relevant to the prospect and yet are not being provided by the competition or being provided insufficiently.

This way it will get to a uniquely relevant feature. This feature will determine its positioning stance. Filling up a 'vacuum' in the market is both easy and profitable. The wooing of the prospect is more a matter of mind, planning and creativity. As more and more hospitals realize that, healthcare would be promoted in a more systematic and effective way. Hospital owners will be benefited by learning to read their prospects.