

## **Roundtable discussion “Branding & positioning in the healthcare market”**

**By Thomas Rundall**

Health professionals from the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States participated in the roundtable discussion of branding and positioning in healthcare. Major points discussed during the roundtable discussion include the following:

An effective branding campaign requires careful consideration of the target audience. Healthcare systems may seek to establish a brand in local, national and/or international markets. Health systems may seek to establish different brands and position themselves differently in each of these markets.

In local markets, healthcare organizations seek to establish a brand that increases the preference for their organization among residents within their primary service area. In recent years, it appears there has been a shift in branding strategy in local markets. Where once health organizations marketed the state-of-the-art nature of their medical technology and the quality of their medical staff, particularly in the specialty areas of surgery, pediatrics, neuroscience, cancer, and cardiac care, now the quality of the patient physician relationship and of the interactions between patients and other clinical and non-clinical staff are emphasized. This new emphasis is evident in the branding tag lines used in several current campaigns.

John Muir Health, headquartered in Walnut Creek, California, has successfully established a brand of patient-centered care: “We listen, we explain, we partner with you”.

Sutter Health, a competitor of John Muir Health, uses the tag line “We + You” that also emphasizes the relational aspects of the care they provide patients.

In the New York City market, Mt. Zion Health System and New York Presbyterian Hospital have similarly emphasized patient experience in their branding. Mt. Zion uses tag lines that emphasize partnering with patients over the long term to improve health and avoid illness: “For you for life,” and “If our beds are filled, we have failed”. At Presbyterian Hospital the tag lines use to help create their brand combine an emphasis on patient centered care, “We put patients first”, and the overall quality of the care provided, “Amazing things are happening here”.

It is important to the long-term success of any branding strategy that the organization is able to deliver on the brand promise made to community residents, patients, doctors, nurses, and others. In some instances, the healthcare organization may have to make extraordinary efforts to change the organization’s capabilities and culture to support the brand promise. For example, John Muir Health suspended its brand campaign based on “We listen, we explain, we partner with you,” after a year in order to work with their clinical and support staff to help them understand how the staff could communicate better with their patients to fulfill the brand promise. When the campaign was restarted, the feedback from patients indicated considerably higher satisfaction with the brand promise of listening, explaining and partnering with patients.

When the focus of a branding campaign is to increase the flow of national and international patients to a hospital or health system, the branding strategy often emphasizes the exceptional clinical expertise of the organization’s physicians and the overall prestige of the institution. This is typically done through marketing the organization’s national rankings, in the U.S. especially the ranking done by U.S. News and World Report. In this type of branding effort the hospital and the physicians who provide care in the hospital together

establish the brand. If a prestigious physician moves her practice, for example, the brand is harmed.

Some countries may have regulations that will require special marketing strategies. For example, in Europe generally marketing cannot be directed to patients. In such situations, a branding campaign will have to focus on clinical and administrative leaders. While there is considerable variation in marketing approaches in such situations, typically organizations emphasize their core competencies and the high quality of the specialty care their physicians provide.

Establishing a brand that addresses the needs of important target audiences is critical to the success of any healthcare organization. The brand promise, the target audience, and the marketing techniques used will vary depending on the local versus national/international nature of the target market and the regulations affecting marketing in any given country. Increasingly, local branding tends to emphasize the patient-centered nature of the care provided and the quality of the patient experience. National and international branding efforts assume that potential customers/patients desire superb medical expertise and advanced medical technology, and branding for organizations competing in those markets emphasizes those qualities and the international recognition that comes with such expertise.