



What's Right When?

It's a debate that dates back to the late 1920s: which type of advertising is more effective—emotional or rational? Today, as then, the debate goes on. But there are some principles that can help guide messaging decisions.



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Veteran marketing and public relations strategist Ken Orwig writes that the bottom line lies with the brand itself. The dominant mood (emotional versus rational) is best determined by the brand's elements, including two key aspects, namely: the more innovative or intangible the brand, the greater the need for rational messaging; and the higher the importance to the target, the greater the attention to rational messages.

So Where Does Healthcare Fit?

It is this latter scenario that applies to healthcare; after all, what could be more important to any of us than our healthcare provider selection?

Perhaps understanding the taxonomy of advertising will help. Ads taking an emotional approach must invoke fear, humor, fantasy, hope, compassion, relief, or engagement, at a minimum. Ads using rational arguments will feature technical expertise, scientific evidence, comparisons, or third party validation.

Today's more successful brand campaigns involving healthcare organizations use some combination of emotional and rational. And, with the proliferation of transparency, they must.

Healthcare organizations are looking for ways to position awards, certifications, accreditations, rankings, and ratings as market definers. While many of these accolades are truly signs of distinction, others are less so. And consumers by and large are just confused.

For years, consumers have simply been told that "we" care, have the new gizmo, or were the first to have a physician who could perform surgery and barely leave a mark. Now we are asking them to make sense out of HealthGrades, The Joint Commission, Top 100, Top 50, HCAHPS, Consumer Choice, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Consumer Reports*, and more. Plus, as if there wasn't enough noise in traditional mediums (local TV, radio, print), we are talking about all of this and more in the digital sphere as well. For consumers, the amount of information is overwhelming.

So how does a healthcare marketer determine the best approach to advertising? Following are a few simple rules to guide decisions.

Rule 1. Think large, undefined audiences, and get emotional. Think small, targeted, personal audiences, and get rational.



The diagram will help. Consider the media or audience size. The larger the audience, the less personal the message can be. The goal is to stand out among crowded noisy space—TV, radio, the Sunday paper, billboards—so ask yourself, what stands out?

The most memorable ads are emotional, engaging, and relevant. A 2008 study conducted by TiVo found that consumers were least likely to fast-forward through ads that had emotional elements. An ad can stir an emotional reaction in 30 seconds, but making a rational argument often requires much more information than can be conveyed in a 30-second TV or radio spot, five to seven words on a billboard, or even a quarter-page newspaper ad, leaving adequate room for white space.

As marketing moves closer to the audience, more time and space can be used to create a rational argument. With media choices such as local cable, local radio, and local publications, the cost to buy the media is lower, so it's

feasible to take 60 seconds to tell a more complete story, or perhaps buy a full page to include more copy. Messaging should still have the emotional link, but with some rational references—perhaps a quick mention of an award relevant to the service being promoted—sprinkled in.

Marketing can get closer yet by narrowing the audience to those who might already know the organization. With audiences such as newsletter recipients, mailing list subscribers, website visitors, or individuals targeted for direct mail or email blasts, you can begin to tell a complete story. You can reference emotional messages to reinforce your presence, but you will also be able to dive into explanatory detail about the rational messages that clearly educate the target as to the value of your organization's distinctions. You can clarify misunderstandings, defend your position, and define for the audience what is most important. The organization thus becomes the resource for knowledge.

And when the connection is one-on-one, through social media, blogs, or class attendance, you can create spokespeople or advocates for the organization. Indeed, word of mouth continues to be the best source of information from consumer to consumer.

Rule 2. Fit message structures to the appeal and the medium.

The message structure must fit the appeal. Emotional messages must appeal on some level to fear, hope, experience, or reality. Trust is a powerful emotion, and it must be earned. Typically, those consumers who trust you choose you. So emotional appeals cannot be gratuitous. They must be authentic. The target must, in 30 seconds or less, relate on an emotional level to what you are trying to communicate. You have to be concerned with expressed messages as well as

subliminal ones. The audience has to be able to put themselves into the scenario and recognize the emotional value of being there. Be authentic. Use real scenarios, real people, or—at least—real situations.

In the case of rational messages, remember to fit the medium. How many facts and figures do you want the target to remember? How many are critical to comprehending? Remember the time element, the attention spans, the noise surrounding the message, and the ability of the audience to retain the information until the time is right when it becomes relevant to them. As with emotional appeals, rational appeals must be authentic. The message has to be relevant, credible, and simple to understand. And remember, just like in grade school, honesty is still the best policy—don't stretch or twist the data to make it meaningful if it isn't.

Rule 3. Use a method of expression that works for your appeal.

The best method of expressing an emotionally based message is usually in the form of short storytelling. Tell the story of fear relieved, hope renewed, experience, and expertise humanely delivered and shared.

For rational messages, rely on known experts or authorities to relate the message to the target. Use revered spokespersons; highly regarded experts; or broadly visible, trusted, independent references. Be sure to explain the facts and figures, educating the audience on the relevance of the data. Always remember, if data is worth sharing, it should be worthy of comparing. Tell the audience how they can get more information and answers to their questions. Most important, people generally don't think about hospitals or doctors until they need one, so be sure to give them a reason to hold on to the information until they need it.

Rule 4. Recognize the risks.

What happens if an organization is not recognized the next time ratings come out? What happens if your organization's performance drops or more likely, others improve? What happens if you lose the expert you have relied on or built the platform around?

These are all risks associated with a rational advertising campaign based on awards or ratings. Data is only good for one reporting period, so to build a brand around data is quite risky. Brands need to be developed around quality pursuit, performance promises, and platforms that carry relevance. Emotional advertising carries a brand promise as its copy glue. It allows the organization to showcase its brand delivery as promised and, in turn, build the target's trust and confidence in the brand.

Rule 5. Recognize the returns that come with doing things right.

An organization can impact the rate at which a strong brand is built. By properly balancing both rational and emotional advertising, healthcare organizations can share important decision criteria and appeal to the "trust" factor that often translates into loyalty. Other benefits include the creation of a halo effect of a strong service line appeal that then translates across related services. Or by connecting to the general audience across two or three service lines, the resulting impression can be "they must be good at everything!" Finally, while rational, data-driven arguments are only as good as the next data report, connecting to the audience on an emotional level is timeless, unless a personal experience convinces them otherwise.

The fact of the matter is that both approaches have their pluses and minuses. And although both have a place in a comprehensive marketing strategy, one thing is certain: the debate will continue.

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