Successful health care marketers understand a new paradigm is in place regarding health care for women. Women are a separate market unto themselves, with different needs, expectations, attitudes, and preferences than male health care consumers. They expect gender-specific health care informed by research on females that is evidence-based and improves their health outcomes. They also want meaningful provider-customer communication and will change service faster than men if they don’t get it. They are attracted to programs that help them stay well and prevent disease, and, if sick, women like getting well quickly in attractive facilities with a consumer-friendly care delivery system.

Marketing professionals know women are indispensable customers in the health care industry for several reasons. First, women are the dominant users of health services, accounting for more than 60% of all visits to physicians. They are also the primary decision makers when it comes to health care. In approximately two-thirds of American households, women decide when and where family members receive health care (and choose the insurance benefit plan). Women also influence friends and extended family on where to get health care. Word of mouth is the primary source of health information and referral for women, with their doctors and nurses as secondary sources.

Women are the gatekeepers when health care outside the home is necessary and are the primary in-home caregivers to extended family. Currently, 9% of American women are caregivers (more than 10 million women), and 4% of men care for a sick or disabled child, spouse, parent, or other relative. Statistics show that women spend an average of 18 years caring for their children and another 18 years caring for their aging parents. Finally and perhaps most important, women are the biggest health care spenders. Sixty-six cents of every health care dollar is spent on or by women. At American drugstores, 59 cents of every dollar goes to their medications.

Marketing to women has changed over time from traditional “selling” to long-term relationship building. Serving a gatekeeper who also is a pre-eminent end user of health care requires marketing savvy that demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of women’s behavior and preferences. With women, relationship marketing is key. Therefore, it’s essential to build a customized approach and provide ongoing benefits to the woman client throughout her life stages.

Today’s health care marketers play an important internal role in their organizations. They must provide leadership in educating the organization about the women’s market as well as successfully engaging it. In addition, they must work seamlessly with the priorities of the executive management team. Even given the dominance of women health care customers, CEOs nationwide are still seeking to fully understand the “value” of the women’s market to the overall success of the hospital or health care system. Profitability, increasing leverage with payors, physician satisfaction, and increasing market share are the compelling objectives of today’s CEO. An understanding of the interface between marketing to this critical segment and responsibility for business viability leads to the following conclusions:

• Women customers provide, generate, or control large segments of business.
• Women’s health services are most often business drivers, not huge revenue generators (with notable exceptions in the areas of cancer care and other acute interventions regarding chronic illness in women).
• Women are an indispensable market in health care.

A Priority Market Segment

When contemplating targeting the women’s market, consider the difference between promotion and marketing. A free car seat from the birthing center, a family fun fair with complimentary health screenings and giveaways, or a free women’s health “diary” with topical information and early detection reminders may get a woman and her family in contact with your facility. Promotions get people in the door, but good marketing is what keeps them there.

Good marketing involves continuing relationships with customers over time—high quality services, trustworthiness,
Women's Health Care Needs

Easy access to health information and education, in written and verbal forms

A partnership with their providers and a dialogue about prevention, diagnosis, possible treatment options, and a risk/benefit analysis of courses of action

Respect for their time via streamlined processes and fast test result turnarounds

Personalized care/support and customized services even within mass customization strategies like Internet response

Amenities that deal with their circumstances, such as availability of child care, evening and weekend hours, convenience, or Web-enabled services

Prevention strategies and wellness care

Lifelong access to health care, including portable insurance coverage

Continuity of care and medical records that can be summarized for portability

Satisfying long-term relationships with respected providers they trust

confidence building, and, for women, gender expertise. Women can distinguish between “the same old thing” made pretty for marketing purposes alone and a truly improved program. They feel the difference between walls painted in pastels and services legitimately designed to meet their health care needs. Good marketing encompasses the bigger picture of market segmentation, targeting priority customer subsegments and researching their wants and needs. Marketing includes designing services to match those needs while creatively managing the four “P’s” of the marketing mix—product, place, price, and promotion.

Women are looking for health care that factors in gender-specific research and takes into account new information showing how women experience well-being, disease, or pain; how medications metabolize differently in women; and how women manifest symptoms differently from the well-accepted norms in men. They want a focus on programs and services offered for conditions that occur only in women, affect women differently than men, or occur more frequently in women.

The days of “one-size-fits-all” solutions are gone. Your competitor provider is moving in on the women’s market. The automobile, financial, and insurance industries are also targeting women as a distinct market. It’s a new day!

What Do Women Want?

What women want is based on some differences between the women’s market and the men’s market for health care. For instance, women are more likely to seek health care information on their own, be dissatisfied with their health care, and be pressed for time. They care about good communication and are often frustrated about the way doctors talk to them. It’s worth noting that women tend to be older because they live an average of seven years longer than men do. Women make frequent visits to hospitals and doctors and make health decisions for their families. In particular, they are concerned about their life stages and the life process such as childbirth and menopause.

Initiating or upgrading women’s health services provides an excellent opportunity for organizations to do an internal check on the quality of care, customer service, facilities, and printed materials they provide. The ultimate goal is to infuse the entire organization with an understanding of and value for the quality, communication, and setting that women expect. Women are barometers for marketers. Successfully marketing superior services to women is a way to “raise the bar” internally for quality, innovation, and extraordinary customer service.

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