

# Using Analogies to Advertise Serious Subjects to Consumers

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Much traditional hospital advertising has focused on the "inside out"—that is, trumpeting the advanced technology or caring providers—without really making a direct connection with the way consumers think of their healthcare needs. Too often we still see TV spots that depict flashing lights and beeping sounds in the emergency room, a surgeon preparing for an operation, or a nurse showing concern to a patient in an exam room, while a voice over talks about how sophisticated the care is at ABC Hospital. All hospitals wish to be

perceived as "high tech/high touch," but in so doing, there often is a failure to communicate about serious healthcare subjects in a way that gets people to recognize and take action on their problems.

The reality is that most people do not think of themselves as a someday heart attack, a potential cancer patient, or possible trauma victim. Healthcare marketing must appeal to consumers who may never have need of a hospital's services until

much later than an advertising message is broadcast. In building its brand, a hospital must not only connect with physicians, who are the primary distribution channel, but also must imprint a position in the consumer's mindset. General ads that are aimed at promoting technology ("we have the area's first PET scanner") or that simply say ABC Hospital is a "US News and World Report best hospital" have their strongest appeal with the smaller set of persons who already know they need intervention. Hospitals that are trying to build advanced capabilities in



heart care, cancer, orthopedics or neuroscience need to appeal to a broader population; they need to make a stronger connection with consumers than simply saying that they have the most sophisticated technology, the best physicians, or the best hospital.

Healthcare consumer research we have conducted consistently shows that people respond well to messages that simplify complex issues by comparing them with things they routinely encounter in everyday life. They do not respond as well to messages that are designed to scare them into action. By using analogies, hospital advertising can be very effective in communicating complex or serious healthcare issues in ways that are not frightening or intimidating to the consumer.

## When Do Analogies Not Work?

Not everything a hospital does lends itself to advertising with analogies. For example, showing a dripping faucet to advertise urinary incontinence would be in poor taste and an insult to those who suffer from this malady. These people already

**Methodist**

## Are YOU a suspect?

6  
5  
4

Heart Failure

Family History

Previous Heart Attack

Low Pumping Heart Rate

**Sudden Cardiac Death** strikes unusual suspects. Anyone, at any age, can be at risk. It's an electrical problem of the heart. If you have risk factors such as heart failure, previous heart attack, family history, electrical heart abnormalities, or think you should be tested for a low, inadequate pumping ability of the heart, call the Methodist Arrhythmia Center.

methodistmedicalcenter.org Call the Methodist Arrhythmia Center at 1-877-R-U-AT-RISK (1-877-782-8747)

know what their problem is and the larger population is likely to be turned off (no pun intended) through this approach. To be effective, the analogy has to have educational value as well as a broad appeal to persons who may be called the "worried well." These are the people who will make an appointment for a prostate screening, heart scan, or colon cancer screening.

Advertising serious or complex healthcare subjects through analogies should also make sense to physicians who often use everyday processes to explain procedures to their patients. If the analogy rings true to them, the chances are very strong that it will ring true to the consumer.

### **Analogies That Make Heart Disease Understandable**

Probably more than any other clinical offering, heart care lends itself to analogy advertising. We know that the heart has two main purposes: to pump blood and to maintain a steady beating of the heart muscle by regulating electrical impulses. Why not use analogies in advertising these basic functions to educate consumers who may have arrhythmia, heart failure, or who may be unknowing candidates for sudden cardiac death?

### **Arrhythmia**

For example, one hospital we have worked with conducted a campaign to promote its arrhythmia/electrophysiology program that has very effectively connected with consumers. Using lamps and light fixtures one might find in a department store's lighting section, a TV spot (created in a studio made to look like a department store) shows various lamps, some shining brightly, some flickering from brightness to faintness, with a close up of a filament in a lone bulb that suddenly goes dead. Interspersed with this footage is computer-assisted imagery of an actual heart in fibrillation. The voice over explains how arrhythmia involves an erratic firing of the electrical impulses of the heart. The visuals make the connection between the flickering lamps and the erratic firing very clear. A voice over explains how the hospital has the expertise to both diagnose and treat arrhythmia and finishes with a cardiovascular specialist standing by the light fixtures, a very

memorable visual that was replicated in print and outdoor ads.

### **Heart Failure**

This same campaign featured another example of analogy advertising, this time to advertise the diagnosis and treatment of heart failure. The spot shows a little girl with her grandmother running to get a drink of water from a water fountain. When the little girl sips from the fountain, the water pumps straight up and flows freely. However, when her grandmother attempts to drink from the fountain, the water slows to a trickle, demonstrating the heart's inability to pump adequately. A voice over explains the issues involved with congestive heart failure and how the hospital can both treat and manage the disease. The spot ends with the cardiovascular team standing in the foreground of a full-size and high-pumping fountain. The visual was replicated in print and outdoor ads.

### **Sudden Cardiac Death**

Sudden cardiac death can strike anyone at any age. But the people who are most risk for this fate are asymptomatic, so how do you get them to be screened for potential SCD without resorting to the usual scare tactics? One hospital played off the old detective genre with a police lineup, where a detective tells his partner to "bring in the usual suspects." However, his partner notes that these are unusual suspects—that is, everyone in the lineup looks normal. The lineup includes a mix of young and elderly men and women of African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian descent. Each is a suspect for SCD because of a major risk factor, i.e. low pumping rate of the heart, family history of heart disease, etc. The purpose of the spot is to highlight the fact that people with these risk factors should be seen by a cardiologist to make sure their lifestyle behavior does not put them at further risk. The "suspects" analogy conveys in a playful yet direct way that people with certain cardiovascular risk factors should take immediate action.

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