

# **Mom Wanted Me to Be a Doctor (Now I Just Market Them)**

*By Les Altenberg*

If I had told my mother thirty years ago that I was going to become an advertising guy, there's little doubt she would have contorted her face into her best, "You should feel guilty," mode and said, "Ach... Better you should become a Doctor... or a Lawyer perhaps, eh? ...Or at least, a nice young accountant."

There was always something special about "professionals." Maybe its because they had extra schooling or represented the promise of large sums of future income. Whatever the reason, "professionals" were held in incredibly high esteem. Then of course, along came malpractice insurance, managed care, television shows like L. A. Law and the O.J. Simpson case. At the same time, rules changed and professionals were allowed to advertise on television and we witnessed cheesy commercials for Jacoby & Meyers.

All of a sudden all these God-like beings fall down a notch or two in the only court that really matters – my Mom's – I mean the court of public opinion. And suddenly professionals turn to us ad guys for advice in propping up an image, branding, and increasing client volume.

It's an interesting marketing dilemma professionals face. Traditionally they grew their business by word of mouth. It was nice and it didn't sully the very profession of which they were a part. Now however, the battlefield for clients/patients has been expanded and the most aggressive advertisers (on spot TV, cable, radio) only underscored some of the least positive images the public had of these professionals to begin with.

So as marketing gurus, we're often asked by medical practices/facilities, law firms, accounting practices alike, "What do we do?" And the first response we give is inevitably a question itself, "Well, are you willing to be a little patient?" This is usually met with a perplexed expression akin to the child who has just realized that magic is

really nothing more than well rehearsed tricks. The first thing we preach is that marketing, just like medicine or law or tax-cutting, is part art and part science. There are no magic tricks, but if you're willing to do the work and stay the course, the rewards are well worth it.

All of this is true of course if the professional understands the need to refrain from the ill-fitting suit, bad toupee image of the lawyer standing in front of a desk shouting, "If you've been injured, you can sue!" Does this type of rabble-rousing get business? Yes, probably. But at what cost? What types of clients does it attract? At what types of margins? How does this tarnish the professional's ability to deal with his or her peers, within a hospital, a court system, etc.? More importantly, this type of lowbrow marketing needs to be maintained in order to have even any value whatsoever. Hence, it becomes more costly over the long haul.

There is another option. A two-pronged attack, which brands the company as a whole, while establishing expertise in specific industry niches. It requires soul-searching, often facilitated by someone from the outside, asking seemingly simplistic, but very difficult questions. Questions such as, "Why should someone hire you?" Once the uniqueness of the business is firmly established in the minds of both the client and the marketing firm, the task of developing a brand image and implementing creative materials, events, etc., becomes inherently less difficult (sometimes even fun). It creates stronger, more cost efficient promotional efforts.

The second part of an integrated program involves incorporating public relations into the marketing mix. Here, specific areas of expertise are leveraged into feature stories, interviews, and guest appearances on broadcast programs. The great "lie" about public relations is that it requires a network of contacts. The reality is that the media hungers for material to print or present. It is important to provide valuable information on a topic that is current (even a particular news event of the day). Reporters are often looking for a local expert's insight, even if that professional was not involved in a particular news event. The key to remember is that editors and producers are people too. And like the

rest of us, are inherently lazy. The more you can do to put a story together for them, the greater the opportunity for success. The more a professional is cited in the media, the greater likelihood that professional will be seen as an “expert.”

So all of this really isn't that complex. Heck, even an open-minded physician, attorney or accountant should be able to understand this. Now, if I could only get Mom to understand what it is exactly that I do.

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