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# Transplant Center Marketing

*Edward Y. Zavala*

Marketing has become a necessary discipline in health care, and transplant centers may find themselves involved in discussions with their hospitals on how to build market share and improve the bottom line. Developing a marketing approach for a transplant center requires a focus on the marketing goals desired, strategy development, and program formulation. Not only must the transplant center have a multidisciplinary *clinical* transplant team, but with the competitive business forces in transplantation, a multidisciplinary transplant *business* team is needed to meet these ongoing and evolving business issues.

Marketing problems do not exhibit the neat quantitative properties of problems in production, accounting, or finance. Psychological forces play a large role.

## Introduction

Market-oriented thinking is a necessity in today's competitive health care environment. Transplant finds itself in a relatively good position of easily identifying its target audiences. Mass advertising is not necessary, but a focused approach to the target audience is imperative.

Obviously, marketing thinking is not easy or it would be applied more often and more successfully. Marketing problems do not exhibit the neat quantitative properties of problems in production, accounting, or finance. Psychological forces play a large role. Marketing decisions must be made in the face of insufficient information about processes that are dynamic, interactive, and often just plain difficult. This is not an argument for intuitive decision-making. Rather, it is an argument for improved strategic thinking and tools for analysis.

Transplant presents its own unique set of challenges with key target audiences having their unique needs that must be considered when developing a marketing approach and relationship-building strategy.

This review article will provide an overview of some marketing fundamentals and their application to marketing the transplant center.

## Developing a Marketing Plan

Developing a marketing plan for a transplant center requires goal formulation, that is, setting specific objectives and goals.

Very few organizations pursue only one objective. It is helpful to have a mixture of objectives that tar-

get specific areas for the transplant center. For a transplant center, objectives could be increased market share, reputation, increased consumer and referring physician awareness, creativity, and so on. The transplant center sets these objectives and then manages by them. For this type of system to work, the transplant center's various objectives should be hierarchical, quantitative, realistic, and consistent.

Instead of developing a long list of objectives for the planning period, which vary in importance, the transplant center should strive to arrange them hierarchically, from the most to the least important. Figure 1 shows a hierarchical approach to a transplant center's objectives.

Objectives should be quantitative to the greatest extent possible. A transplant center has to choose realistic target levels for its objectives. The target levels should come from a review of the transplant center's current market share and referral sources—and not from idealization. Finally, the transplant center's objectives must be consistent. It is sometimes not possible to achieve a significant increase in referrals at the least cost or design a high-quality comprehensive transplant marketing brochure in the shortest possible time. The transplant center must adopt consistent goals or else there will be confusion and frustration.

## Strategy Development

Goals indicate where a transplant center wants to go; strategy answers how to get there. A transplant center must tailor a strategy for achieving its goals.

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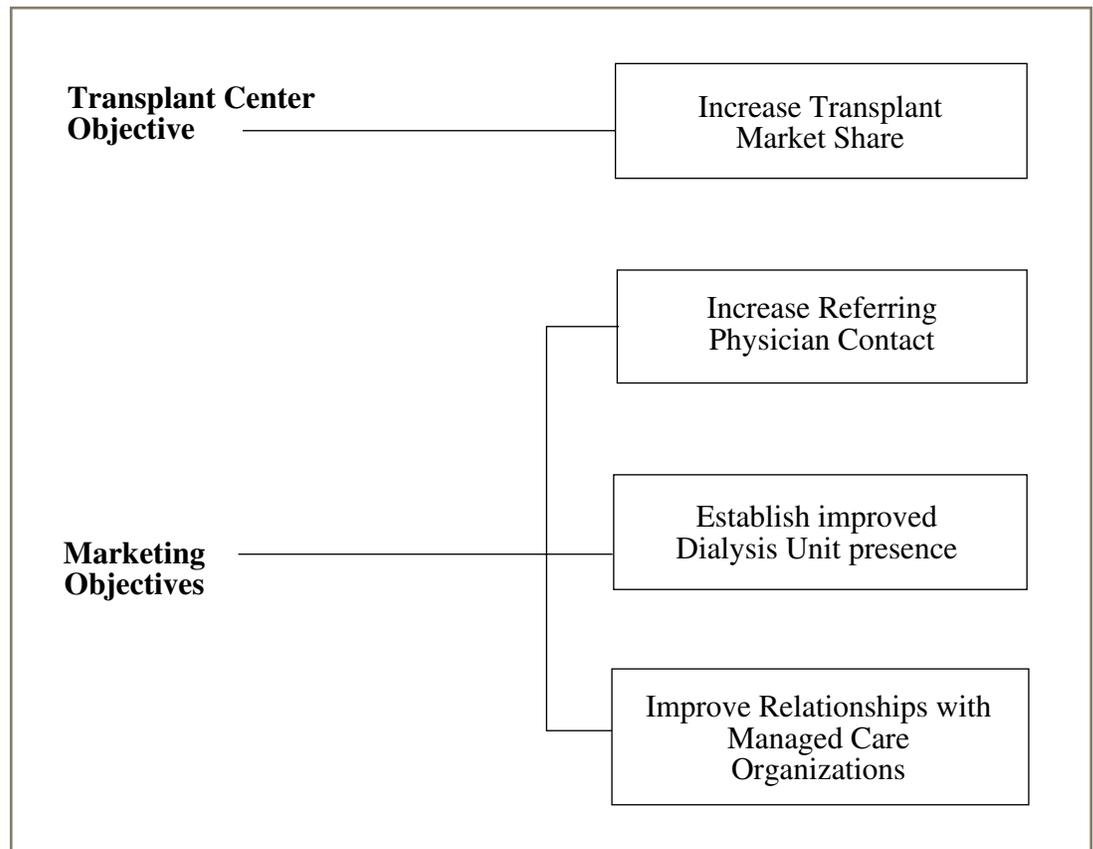


Figure 1. Hierarchy of objectives.

The strategy must be refined to specific programs and implemented efficiently—and corrected if they fail to achieve the objectives. A solid strategy for transplant centers is a focused approach to specific target audiences. To continue with the example from Figure 1, a strategy statement could be “provide improved communications and build strong relationships with referring physicians, dialysis units, and managed care organizations (MCOs).” Fortunately, the target audiences for transplant are readily identifiable. The referring physician is critically important. Depending on the transplant program being marketed, the targeted physicians could be nephrologists, cardiologists, gastroenterologists, pulmonologists, and so on. Specialty nurses have become incredible facilitative referral sources and can be targeted by their specialty, that is, nephrology, cardiology, and so on. Targeting patients is a lit-

tle more problematic in extra-renal transplantation. Patients with end-stage organ failure, other than kidney, do not congregate in any specific place. However, end-stage renal disease patients on dialysis are in dialysis centers 3 times per week. These dialysis centers are readily identifiable and can provide excellent opportunities to promote a kidney transplant program.

### Program Formulation

Once the transplant center has developed its principal strategies for attaining its goals, it must work out supporting programs for carrying out these strategies.

Once the marketing objectives, target audiences, and strategy statement of “improved communication and building strong relationships” have been reviewed, a program formulation objective could be

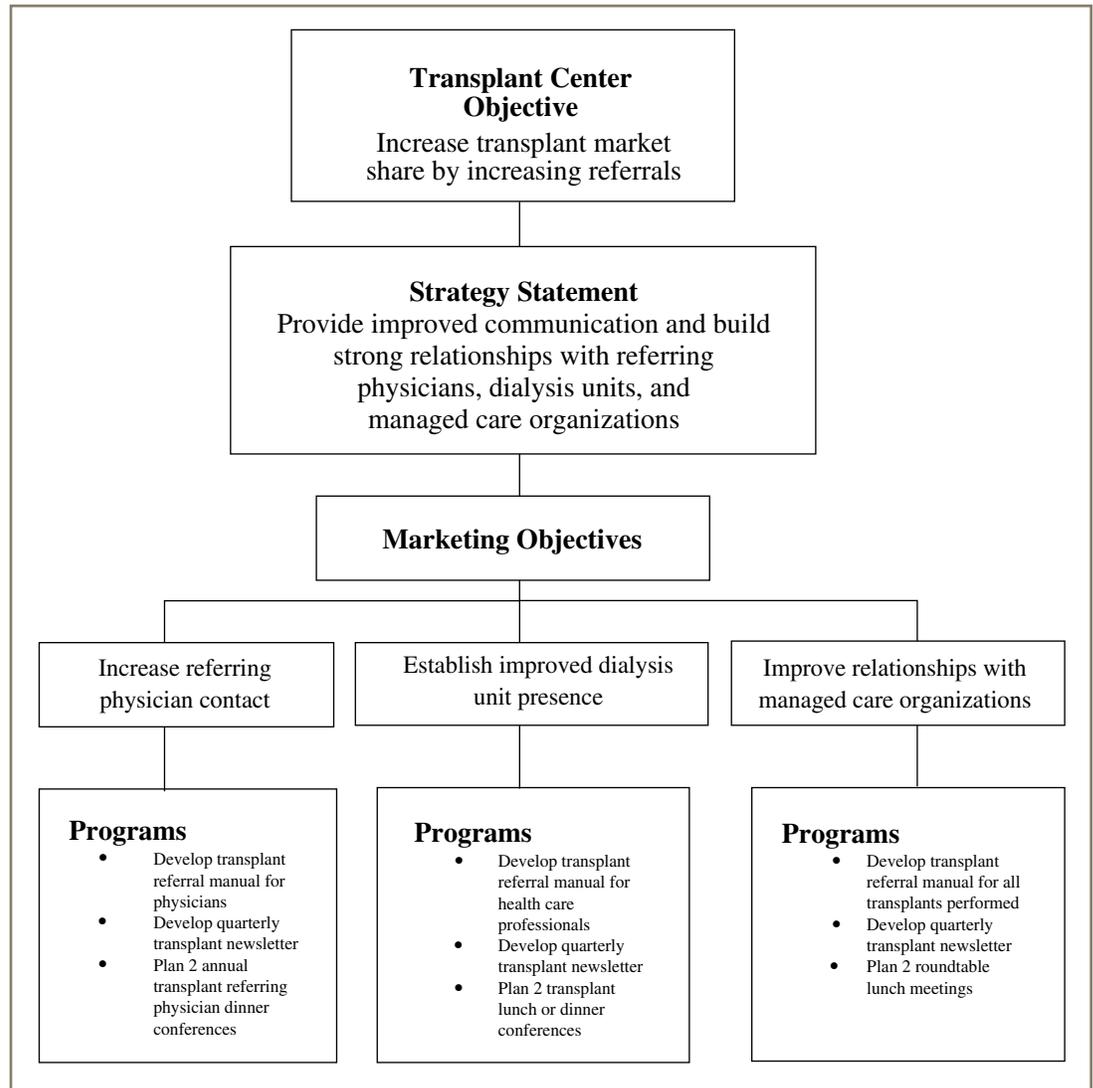


Figure 2. Transplant center marketing plan overview.

In transplantation, you cannot experience the service before you purchase it.

to develop supporting materials such as brochures, referral manuals, newsletters, and so on, which would meet some aspects of the strategy statement and the target audiences. Such collateral materials are a critical element in a service sector such as health care. In transplantation, you cannot experience the service before you purchase it. What are needed are reassuring tangible surrogates that convey the quality of the transplant center. Individuals tend to use appearance to judge reality. The transplant center does not have to design and print the

most expensive 4-color brochure available. Instead, a clean, good-quality, readable, user-friendly design works equally well. The information provided in such materials needs to be substantive enough that an individual can make an informed decision about using the transplant program.

Program development for the target audience of referring physicians can be multifaceted. Some key points to remember about referring physicians of medicine is that they are busier than ever these days seeing more patients because of managed

care issues. Respecting their limited free time is important.

Educational programs on transplantation that can assist a referring physician in his or her practice should be a high priority. Important issues concerning the posttransplant immunosuppressive management of these patients is valuable information for this group of referring physicians. Beyond the subject matter, keep the program concise and on time. For example, plan a concise format on a weekday evening with the following schedule:

- 5:30–6:30 p.m. Social Gathering
- 6:30–7:30 p.m. Dinner
- 7:30–8:30 p.m. Educational Program/Adjourn

This educational and relationship-building format can deliver exceptional return for the effort. In addition to referring physicians, the educational dinner meeting could be offered to MCO medical directors, case managers, and dialysis unit managers. The opportunities to use this format are numerous, and the list of individuals and groups invited can grow over time.

To meet the more specific needs of MCO case managers, a more focused approach may be necessary—perhaps an information exchange with the transplant coordinators, financial counselors/coordinators, social workers, and the MCO case managers. This approach can be facilitated by a lunchtime roundtable discussion at the MCO office or at the transplant center. This type of information exchange can lead to immediate improvements in processes that will ultimately improve patient referral and management.

At this point, the marketing program could appear like Figure 2. The programs support the marketing objectives that support the strategy statement, and ultimately support the transplant center's objective of increasing transplant market share.

A collection of quality brochures about the transplant center's services, numerous dinner conferences, events, roundtables, and so on, are all very good things. However, in health care you are not really selling expertise, because your expertise is assumed. Instead, you are selling a relationship. This is where the most work is needed. Good brochures and educational events can help facilitate relation-

ships, but it takes face-to-face meetings, attention to detail, and superb follow-up.

Even if the transplant center has developed a clear marketing strategy and solid supporting programs, to take it from concept to reality takes work. Implementation of the transplant center marketing strategy will be where you succeed or fail. Marketing strategies are multifaceted, and implementation need not be on the shoulders of one individual. The tasks of making the marketing strategy a reality will take many individuals, including transplant physicians, surgeons, coordinators, secretaries, administrators, hospital marketing, and public relations staff.

## Conclusion

Health care has become an extremely competitive marketplace—transplant even more so. One would think that providing a life-enhancing and life-saving procedure like transplantation would be enough in itself. However, the complexity of the health care business environment forces transplant centers to be not only a multidisciplinary clinical team but also a multidisciplinary business team. Marketing is a necessary discipline in the highly competitive environment of transplantation, and those centers that embrace it and implement it will be the ones that thrive in the future.