

Scratching the surface



(how branding is influencing the health sector)

It often seems that the word 'brand' has two distinctly different meanings. Too often, for some people, brand simply means logo, and maybe even visual style, whilst for other people the word brand encompasses the very ethos of an organisation – its culture, its behaviour, what it communicates and what it offers.

But how could branding affect the health sector? The NHS brand enjoys 90% positive recognition – a statistic that many commercial brands would kill for! And surely doctors and hospitals are immune to commercial competition?

Absolutely not. For a start we can now choose which hospital we want to attend. And indeed the NHS is now billed as 'NHS Choices – your health, your choices'. This means competition between hospitals. Our GP can help us with our decision (in fact, the recent GP Patient Survey - Hospital Choice specifically asks 'Did your doctor talk with you about a choice of hospital for your appointment?'). Alternatively, as with just about any modern decision we have to make, we can do our own research online.

This means that each hospital must ensure that their website, especially, provides the kind of information that people need to make a decision about their choice of treatment. Indeed, some hospitals have excellent websites.

But many still do not. NHS hospital websites often look like they exist simply due to the fact that there has to be a website – they do not function as vital communication channels, they do not attempt to inform, reassure, and convince their various audiences (patients, doctors, staff, opinion-formers, etc). And as the competition for patients (for this is what we are talking about) increases, any hospital that cannot convince us about the quality of its service, and why it is excellent, may well begin to suffer in terms of funding.

This is where the idea of a hospital having a holistic, all-encompassing approach to its brand really makes sense. For example, for several years I have attended my local dental hospital with my son. The reception environment was always dowdy and uninspiring, and seemed to rub off on the staff, who seemed bored and listless. The x-ray department presented endless queues, battered plywood walls and huge black machines that felt like they should have belonged in the Science Museum. To cap it all, on one occasion, I watched in horror as an x-ray technician put her bare finger in my son's mouth. I had to constantly remind myself that, in general, he was receiving excellent, completely free dental treatment (which he was).

So we are back to culture and behaviour, which as we have all experienced, can often be extremely hit and miss across the NHS.

However, on our last visit, I was pleased to see that the reception had been newly refurbished, but two things caught my attention.

Firstly, the reception desk was now behind a glass screen (a sign of the times?), and was already festooned with a 'sellotape culture' of not particularly official-looking, randomly-placed, sellotaped and blu-tacked notices. Secondly, the new, plasterboard walls were uniformly scored and torn all the way around the reception by the backs of the plastic chairs in the waiting area.

How can a process to refurbish a hospital reception fail to recognise that these are extremely hard-working areas, and so need to be robust and durable, and will be staffed with people who will put up notices? In this example, the brand was not clear – was this going to be a quality organisation, or not?

It seems clear that competition is forcing NHS trusts to be far more commercial in their approach – and this means that each Trust must have a distinct, holistic brand – clearly expressed by its communications and clearly understood by its staff - whilst still remaining within the NHS.

But there is a word of warning. The very essence of the NHS as a whole is that it is committed to quality medical care. This means that each NHS Trust brand must be underpinned by a national commitment to providing modern, excellent healthcare. Remember, whatever their choice, all people still really want are for hospitals to be nice and clean, with friendly, professional staff.

The brand must not be simply window-dressing.

So, if you are considering your hospital or NHS Trust branding:

1. Identify clear messages that you want to convey to your key audiences
2. Understand what these audiences want to know about you
3. Make sure that you realise the potential of your website as a communications tool
4. Think about first impressions – are your staff welcoming and reassuring, and are your public areas clean and well-maintained?
5. Make no mistake – the NHS brand is a powerful endorsement of your organisation.

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