



## June 2006: Jump on the Brandwagon — The Trend Toward Branding in Hospitals

### Jump on the Brandwagon — The Trend Toward Branding in Hospitals

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*To stay competitive, many hospitals are using branding techniques to develop effective patient care programs, ensure a stable workforce, and boost revenue.*

In today's nutrition and foodservice environment, effective brand marketing is a key strategy for success. This emotional connection between a product and its audience generates acceptance and can lead to increased sales. Many operations have signed on with national brands, which can bring both benefits and challenges. Using proven marketing methods to develop in-house brands in a hospital setting can open doors and generate revenues. Taking this step could play a role in maintaining self-operated nutrition services and staff positions in an increasingly competitive environment.

Many opportunities exist for dietitians to brand programs and products in healthcare settings—from weight management to community-based healthy eating programs, services for restaurants, in-house foodservice venues, and take-home eating options for staff and guests. The following are key areas to consider:

- branding/launching hospital-based programs;
- weight management;
- healthy eating programs for restaurants and food retailers; and
- foodservice programs (e.g., take-out, heat and eat, gourmet coffee kiosks).

### The Challenge

Nutrition departments in hospitals are being placed under the financial spotlight at a continually increasing rate. Developing targeted fee-for-service programs that will help provide quality patient care as well as revenues is one strategy for enhancing job security.

Hospital and clinic nutrition services can utilize various business models to develop successful programs that can compete with commercial services. RDs have the nutrition expertise and knowledge base to begin the process of program development. The next step is to combine good business acumen with savvy branding strategies—making you a winner for your institution and possibly launching a new career at the same time.

### Weight Management Programs

Sensible and successful solutions to weight management are natural products to develop in hospitals today. Some facilities require ready-to-go programs because of time and staff constraints. Building and branding your own weight management programs can be a smart approach because it allows for flexibility in program components, is cost effective (no licensing or usage fees), helps establish the institution as a leader in weight management expertise, and highlights the credibility of your staff. A hungry market exists for quality weight management programs that are developed by professionals and are targeted to healthcare institutions. There are also opportunities to package and market your program to other facilities.

Nearly every corporation is jumping on the health and wellness bandwagon—partly due to escalating healthcare costs, but also to set themselves apart from their competitors. The time is right for new approaches and cutting-edge services.

### **Survival Strategies**

If you are considering developing and branding weight management or wellness programs for your facility, here are a few strategies for success:

- **Ensure administration is on board:** Before embarking on a branding venture, it is critical that you gain support and participation from senior management. The best intentions can falter if your leadership is not on board. Your passion for the project can be infectious, so be sure to share your enthusiasm with the leaders in your organization and help them become part of the process. In some cases, the administrator may approach the RD to develop innovative programs and products to assist staff and patients in adopting healthier lifestyles—all in an effort for healthcare claim cost containment with an ongoing vision of revenue generation.
- **Secure funding—make the plan:** Work with business development experts, either internally or externally, to form a business plan that addresses return on investment and long-term goals of marketing products and services outside the hospital and into the local business community and beyond. Be realistic in projecting revenues and include other intangible benefits that the institution will gain beyond revenue, such as media exposure, community presence, and a healthier workforce. Determine outcome measurements that reflect lifestyle and behavioral improvements and biomedical data.

Propose revenue sources from products, program fees, and other services. Branded products could include dietary supplements, healthy food items, fitness equipment, culinary tools, books, and other wellness items.

- **Medical partners in programming:** Invite key professionals into the program development process. Seek input from MDs, PTs, RNs, and other staff as the building blocks of the brand are formed. They will provide a solid foundation and committed referral source, acting as internal spokespersons for the program. Ask to be added to the agenda of board and medical group meetings. Sell them on the benefits of the program and encourage their participation in launch events. Invite key players to attend the programs as your guest so they can effectively inform others about your services. If appropriate, consider adding a mini-taste of the program to their weekly staff meetings—and make it fun and informative.

Program success depends on generating excitement throughout the facility and educating staff about the benefits and approaches. Also, be sure to get on the agenda at department managers' meetings. Building relationships and alliances with staff that will help promote your programs will be invaluable.

- **Public relations:** Partner with in-house marketing staff to develop your plan. Identify the initial thrust of the launch: Are you targeting the program exclusively to staff or will you break into the market with a splash throughout the community via a full media campaign, including local television news, print, and radio? For internal marketing, consider all methods available to get the word out—from newsletters to Web sites, flyers, posters, launch events (in high-traffic areas), and mailings to staff. Consider introductory offers, such as reduced rates and drawings for health-related products. Have fun with it and let your personality shine through the marketing efforts. Enthusiasm is contagious—help people realize what they will miss if they don't get involved.
- **Brand basics:** Think of branding as making your "mark" in the industry and establishing a name and look for your programs and services. This can be as simple as designing a logo, which can also be critical to building an emotional response to your programs and services. Be certain your name is protected by a registered trademark before development. Team up with in-house marketing experts to develop a design. Utilize a professional designer to include key attributes of the program. Establish what sets you apart from commercial

weight-loss programs and write a mission statement.

Taking the time up front to professionally brand your programs will help you compete in the marketplace. Capitalize on unique approaches, value-added services, and experts who are supportive and credible. Consider a holistic theme with a multidisciplinary team of exercise physiologists, psychologists, behavior therapists, RDs, and culinary experts.

### **Brand Image Development**

Establish your approach and capitalize on recent trends in weight loss. The buzz about low-carb and restricted diets has diminished dramatically, and the time is ripe for a paradigm shift. Current approaches to weight management can incorporate some of these trends: personalized approaches, easy access, multilevel programs, technology, flexible participation, and payment options that are geared to meet the needs of the participant.

Market your program with images that reflect your approach and are sensitive to your target market. Today's consumers desire a program that offers results without drastic lifestyle changes. The traditional before-and-after photos are used routinely and savvy consumers are aware of the poor long-term success rate of most diet programs. Perhaps consider highlighting the uniqueness of your new approach and incorporate testimonials of people who share how they have not only lost weight but also changed their lives in other ways.

### **Branding Partners in Foodservice**

- **Healthy eating programs:** A natural tie-in to your weight management program is a healthy eating program in foodservice areas. Keeping with market trends, some operators are redesigning their dining areas to reflect a "healthy" image and boosting sales as a result. Contract foodservice companies in hospitals and universities have stepped up to the plate in this arena, offering attractive branded healthy eating programs with light options and organic items.

Branding your own healthy eating program that is consumer-friendly can pay big dividends. You may also consider marketing the program to local restaurants and food retailers. Again, be sure to perform a name search and registered trademark if you plan on external marketing.

Develop a theme for your healthy eating program and avoid the pitfalls of a dieting connotation or restrictive description. Healthy eating and moderation is a good focus. Choices could include entrees, grab-and-go items, light desserts, and vending items. Market them with attractive point of purchase materials such as posters, signs, and banners. Break the stigma that healthy foods are more costly by proposing to senior leadership that fresh fruits, vegetables, and healthy eating choices be subsidized, making it cost effective to eat healthy.

- **Gourmet coffee kiosk:** The popularity of specialty coffee is growing exponentially and the trend for hospital foodservice operators is to upgrade their coffee service for staff and guests by offering national brand coffees. Employees and guests are provided with enhanced services while offering another opportunity for the foodservice department to diversify and gain revenue. If space and budget allow, a freestanding coffee kiosk in a high-traffic area offers both guests and employees an opportunity to enjoy a quality product in a convenient location. You may want to pursue an arrangement with a quality national or regional brand for coffee and espresso products.

- **Java tips for kiosk success:** When developing your business plan, one of the largest costs will be the espresso machine. National coffee purveyors who offer foodservice programs may sell espresso machines or you may seek other equipment sources. The espresso machine you purchase must be designed for large-volume use and also include a service contract. Once the equipment and product providers are determined, develop a unique name and logo for the kiosk.

Quick morning food choices such as gourmet pastries, whole grain muffins, fresh fruit, yogurt, and breakfast bars can meet customer demands. Sandwiches, salads, wraps, snack bars, and baked chips are additional crowd pleasers. Fruit smoothies and various blended iced drinks are other options that appeal to non-coffee drinkers.

### **Cuisine to Go**

Tap into the market of busy employees who struggle with meal planning and lack of time to cook. A chef- and RD-developed “meals to go” service can launch your department into yet another market. One popular variation is to provide fresh meal components, seasonings, and directions for preparation. This type of service is becoming popular across the country. Your facility is already set up as a professional kitchen and can offer daily solutions to mealtime at home for staff—just drop by and take home healthy, ready-to-cook cuisine.

- Strike while the iron is hot: The writing is on the wall. If hospital dietitians don’t move forward to fill the need for innovative programs, they will be surpassed either by aggressive commercial weight-loss companies or contract food companies that are poised to market themselves inside the doors of healthcare institutions and down the street in corporate wellness programs. RDs have the skills and experience to establish turfs in this competitive world. Remember to capitalize on your skills and also be willing to seek advice and assistance in areas in which you may be less experienced.

If you have been contemplating a move into hospital-based branding, take a chance and step up to the plate.

— *Ruth Lahmayer Chipps, MS, RD, CD, has branded weight management, healthy eating, and foodservice programs and products for more than 15 years.* Copyright © by Today's Dietitian Magazine All Right Reserved. Great Valley Publishing Co., Inc., publishes **Today's Dietitian, Social Work Today, For The Record, Radiology Today, and Today's Diet and Nutrition.** Published on: 2006-06-05