

## MARKETING STRATEGIES OF EYE CARE SERVICES

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Marketing encompasses a wide range of business activities undertaken to bring the products to the consumers; the products they want, at the time they want, at the place they want them, at prices that they can afford and it also involves enabling the customer to take informed choices i.e. providing all the information the customer needs to make satisfying choices. Thus marketing includes activities that are vital to any organization, including health care organizations. This article reviews the features of marketing (Four P's), a good or a product in a traditional market, the unique features of a service market like eye care, the challenges involved in marketing such services and the relationship and the role played by the marketing department in traditional and service markets. Some of the marketing strategies to overcome the problems unique to a service like eye care will be analyzed in the second part of the article.

### Marketing

The American Marketing Association defines marketing as the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchange that satisfy individual and / or organizational goals.

### Marketing Mix

The Marketing Mix refers to the appointment of efforts, the combination, the designing and the integration of the elements of marketing into a programme or mix which, on forces will best the basis of an appraisal of the market forces will best achieve an enterprise at a given time". Marketing is performed within a constantly changing environment and thus marketing activities have to change in consonance with environment to be effective. In a traditional market, marketing mix, is used to describe a combination of four elements and they are popularly known as "Four Ps". The four basic elements are:

- Products
- Price
- Promotion
- Place

- Product is the goods or service offered by the organization after identification of the needs of the society.
- Price refers to the money value the customer has to pay and this is determined taking into consideration, profit margin, the cost, and the possibility of sales in different prices. Prices for services like eye care requires separate and special planning unlike prices for products like automobiles or soft drinks.
- Promotion is the aspect of communicating benefits of a product or service to the target customer in order to persuade them to purchase such products or avail such services.
- Place refers to the channels of distribution through which the product has to move before it reaches the customer. A classical example in eye care services include the provision of services in the base hospital and in camps for general public and in places of targeted sections of the society like schools, factories, offices etc.

### **Service Marketing**

A large proportion of blindness is avoidable or easily treatable. To address this situation, interventions specific to blindness are required, which will include prevention, eye Health promotion, protection, treatment and rehabilitation. The problem of blindness is acute in rural areas and hence the programme must try to expand the accessibility of ophthalmic services in these areas. We need to make consistent and focused efforts to ensure that people in rural areas receive the same kind of care that is available to privileged communities in urban areas. This requires us to proactively design interventions that consider issues of accessibility, affordability and quality. Service Marketing is mainly required for breaking the barrier and creating awareness to the community about outreach camps and eye care services. Another point of service marketing is to reduce the backlog from the community and also to eliminate the needless blindness. Also it changes the community's attitude and behavior through marketing and creates demand and utilize the eye care services. From the view point of hospital service marketing can improve the productivity, challenge to develop infrastructure and also they can train the staffs.

### **Service Market**

Unlike dispensation of a product or a good to the prospective customer, health care delivery is a service offered to the people by the health care institution and medical professionals. A service is an activity or a series of activities of intangible nature- to a lesser or to a great extent that normally takes place in the interaction between the customer and service provider by which are provided as a solution to the customer's problems.

### **Distinctive Features of a Service Market**

The special characteristics of services as different from physical goods or products are **Intangibility**

This is the fundamental difference between goods and services. Since services are performances they cannot be felt, seen, tasted or touched in the same manner as we can do with physical goods. For example, during an eye check-up, the whole process cannot be actually quantified but can be experienced only unlike an automobile-a physical good-that can be seen, touched and physically checked and even test driven before purchasing. All physical goods have some element of service built in them and similarly all services have some tangible component and thus it is the relative dominance of intangibility in services as compared to dominance of tangibility in goods.

The intangibility of services poses a number of challenges like

- (1) Services cannot be stored and therefore it becomes difficult to manage fluctuation in demands. Demand for eye care services especially surgical procedure is typically more in summer holidays and vacation times.
- (2) Since services cannot be touched, felt, tasted or smelt they cannot be readily displayed or communicated to the customer. Therefore, the customer evaluates service not prior to the purchase of it but in the course of availing it after having paid for it. This makes the process of judgment by the consumer difficult especially in eye care delivery where several people with different level of skills are involved in delivery of service to an individual.
- (3) Prices are difficult to set for health care services because of its intangible nature.

The actual cost of a unit of service is hard to find out.

### **Heterogeneity**

In a service like health care delivery performances are produced mostly by humans and more so in eye care since it done is by multiple personnel, there is strong possibility of variation in these performances. The service delivered may vary from day to day, from producer to producer and from customer to customer. Due to this, it is difficult to ensure consistent service delivery. Therefore, heterogeneity makes standardization and quality control difficult to achieve.

### **Inseparability of Production and Consumption**

In case of delivery of health care services, production and consumption process overlap. While goods are first produces, then sold and consumed, most of the services are sold first and then produced and consumed simultaneously. The interaction between the

Customer and the service provider(s) is the essence of services marketing since it is during this interaction the customer makes a judgment on the level of service being received by him. Since services are produced and consumed at the same time, it is not

possible to have mass production and significant economies of scale. The customer is actually involved in the production process and this may affect the outcome of the service process. The presence of other customers could have an impact on the type of service perceived to be received by a customer.

### Perishability

This means that a service cannot be stored, resold or returned. A hospital bed not occupied on a particular day cannot be used or resold at a later time. This is in contrast to goods, which can be stored or even returned. This perishable nature of services poses a number of challenges:

- (1) Since services cannot be stored forecasting of demand and capacity utilization planning become difficult to decide.
- (2) Since services cannot be resold or returned there is a greater need to have string recovery strategies if the service goes wrong.

### Expanding Features of a Service Market

Since services are produced and consumed simultaneously, the interaction between the customer and the service provider(s) becomes extremely important and it is during this interaction the customer makes a judgment on the level of service being received by him. The actual physical surroundings during the interaction have a substantial bearing on the service delivery. These facts have added three additional components to form the expanded services marketing mix of a service industry.

- (1) People- all human actors who play a part service delivery-personnel, customer and other customers in the immediate environment.
- (2) Physical Evidence-the environment which the service is delivered and where the interaction between the customer and the personnel of the hospital takes place.
- (3) Process - the actual procedure, mechanism and activities undertaken to deliver the service



### Unique Features of Eye Care Delivery

Among the medical service sector, eye care delivery poses certain unique situations and challenges marketing the services. Eye care unlike other several fraternal disciplines is a basic requirement of a human being and there will hardly be any individual who has not met an ophthalmologist in his lifetime at least once. While on one side there is a universe agreement to reduce cost of eye care services provided due to the social cause involved in eradicating needle blindness, on the other hand there is rapid technological advancement, explosion of knowledge, rapid outdateding of treatment options and increased cost incurred of creating, maintaining and updating the infrastructure and compensating the multi-level work force involved in eye care delivery. The customer expects good service at affordable price with minimum waiting which is another challenge in eye care services considered the fact that an ophthalmologist service requires interact the course of delivery of eye care and the very nature of ophthalmic evaluation and treatment takes time. The level of training of the workforce, streamlining of services, good and ambient environment to provide the service are all-important in enhancing the intangible benefits to the patients. With eye hospitals developing in exclusively these challenges have in fact become manifold.

### Marketing Function in a Service Sector

The marketing function in a service sector is different from that of a traditional market and needs special attention and is often conceptualized as a triangle known as the Service-Marketing Triangle.

- **External Marketing** is the process of marketing activities like camps, promotional offers, and commemoration of important health related days with health activities, brand establishment, publication and telecast of educational material in media which are done by the hospital to attract the people to the hospital.
- **Interactive Marketing** is the actual process of service delivery by the personnel done on behalf of the institution, which in turn influences the image of the hospital perceived by the patient and if positive can lead a positive word of mouth communication from the patient to others drawing more people to the hospital. This concept of interactive marketing is unique to service sectors especially hospitals.
- **Internal Marketing** is the process of empowering and training the hospital personnel to provide efficient service delivery and it turn to improve the performance of the hospital and the ultimate achievement of hospital's goals and mission. Internal marketing is done by activities like induction/orientation programs for new entrants to an organization, in-service training programs, exchange programs with similar institutions, refresher courses for employees apart from the regular training programs for the personnel of the hospital.

**Partial Listing of Different Personnel involved in a Cataract Surgery****1. Clinical Personnel**

Ophthalmic Surgeon, Physician, Anesthetist, Optometrist Trainees (i.e. Fellows, Residents, Medical Students) Operating Room or Nursing.

**2. Clinical Support Service**

Pharmacy, Laboratory, Optical, Sterile Service Department, Social Work

**3. Administrative Support Service**

Housekeeping, Food Service, Plant (e.g. Security, Engineer, Plumber, Maintenance, Electrician), Patient Transport, Materials (e.g. Purchasing, Receiving, Distribution), Billing and Insurance, Administration (CEO, VP Patient services, Department Managers & Unit Managers)

Attendees, Fellow Patients, Visitors'

**Relationship between Marketing Function and Marketing Department in a Service Sector**

The marketing function is mainly handled by the marketing department in the case of goods and products wherein the marketing department plans and implements most of the marketing activities and is therefore able to control almost the total marketing function. The traditional marketing done in case of sale of a product or a good like automobile addresses to the external marketing alone. The sale of an automobile is done by brand establishment, advertisement in the media, and efficient work of the marketing and sales personnel. Here the customer has the choice of negotiating the deal, test-driving the vehicle and even availing loans for the purchase of the vehicle. The customer does not in any way come in contact with the manufacturing, ancillary and assembly segments and other support services of the company. Because of simultaneous production, delivery and consumption of services like eye care, the nature of marketing function performed is significantly different in a service sector. A marketing department in a service sector like eye care can only control a minor part of the marketing function. In the case of service provided by a hospital, advertisements and trials are not possible; the customer (patient) cannot negotiate the service. The patient comes into contact with a whole range of personnel in a hospital and the interaction with each one of them in the process of availing service influences his perception about the quality and cost effectiveness of the service provided. The marketing department does not have the necessary authority to manage the buyer/seller interaction therefore cannot effectively plan and implement activities pertaining to the interactive marketing takes place between the customer and the service provider. Thus unlike in the sale of a commodity an automobile all the three sides of the triangle critical to successful marketing of health care service and the triangle cannot just be supported in the absence of any one of the sides and definitely the role of exclusive marketing department in a hospital minimal.

These synthesized marketing strategies are extremely useful for clinics and other social businesses to market their goods and services, as they can be applied to a wide range of enterprises.

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