

Outreach sales success

By Peter T. Francis

Hospitals and medical centers continue to look for strategies to reduce costs and generate more revenues. Part of the plan for many medical centers is to implement a focused marketing approach that increases physician awareness of outpatient services from the hospital's laboratory and diagnostic-imaging department. While commercial labs and imaging centers play a vital role in delivering excellent healthcare services to communities, many hospital administrators feel their institutions can compete effectively for outpatient dollars. Indeed, hundreds of medical centers vie extraordinarily well for these additional revenues, producing millions of dollars for their institutions. The following case study describes a textbook scenario of how a hospital marketing representative landed a large medical practice, resulting in over \$300,000 per year in net dollars to his hospital's outreach program.

Jim Holden was hired by a mid-Atlantic medical center to sell both lab and imaging services to area physicians. As part of his initial introductions, he called on a seven-person OB/Gyn practice whose office was in a pavilion next to the hospital. Holden discovered they engaged the services of a large regional lab for the majority of their clinical and cytology needs; however, they usually recommended their patients utilize the hospital's imaging department for bone scans, mammograms, and other needs.

Pre-call planning, finding a coach, and setting a strategy

Holden began his sales journey with this potential customer by setting out a game plan to convert the lab work to his hospital. He wanted to find someone within the account who would become a champion for his cause — someone who could act as an internal mentor. (Ultimately, this person should be an individual who would provide valuable information about the staff members such as their degree of influence and political alliances.) Also, Holden needed to uncover the decision-making hierarchy within the practice; he understood that power is "invisible" and that organizational charts can be "shadows."

Holden wrote down his objectives for wanting to see the business manager, Betty Orlando. For this first encounter, his reason was to introduce himself, find out about the laboratory needs of the practice, and uncover any issues with its lab service. Holden was able to start building trust and credibility with Orlando because he asked good questions and partly because he gave the impression that he was not selling anything. He knew from previous sales experience that success came from not so much what he talked about but more from what he asked and how well he listened.

Following several encounters with Orlando, Holden unearthed a great deal of background information about the practice. He discovered that a Dr. Hodges was the senior partner. The doctors held monthly meetings to review various issues and business proposals. Even though topics were addressed within a committee, Dr. Hodges had the ultimate authority. Holden knew he had to build a relationship with Dr. Hodges, the final decision

maker who could influence others. Holden also uncovered the fact that Dr. Hodge's nurse had been with him for many years, and she had strong influence within the practice. This was certainly another person Holden wanted to befriend.

Advancing the sale

Over the course of the next six months — with Orlando's help, Holden made individual appointments with each nurse as well as the doctors. His objectives were to introduce himself and explain his role as not only a liaison between the doctors' office and the hospital's lab and imaging department but also as an "information specialist." Holden needed to build his credibility with all of the staff, not just Orlando. He knew he could do this by providing the nurses and doctors educational white papers that he obtained from various diagnostic vendors.

Holden tried to avoid "sale continuations" whenever he could, a syndrome that he adopted earlier in his career where he did not get his customer to agree to move the sale forward; there was no small incremental client commitment that moves the sale forward. To advance the sale, Holden had Orlando agree

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to arrange a meeting with Dr. Hodges, plus two other physicians from the practice. In return, Holden invited his hospital's chief of pathology to join him on the appointment.

The twofold objective was to build a more personal relationship between the pathologist and the clinicians and to discuss the hospital's newly installed, state-of-the-art cytology imaging system. During the meeting, the pathologist conversed about his cytology department's overall quality-control program, the new equipment and its benefits, HPV testing, and general turnaround time for Pap results. The pathologist also iterated the convenience of reviewing a patient's biopsy and cytology slide when clinically indicated. At the end of the discussion, Holden reviewed the points that his pathologist had made and asked the physicians if they would try the hospital for their cytology work. His past experiences at using "trial closes" — where he asked for a potential customer's business for the first time — had proved positive; but the doctors did not commit immediately. They did say they would discuss the possibility at their next monthly meeting with rest of their providers.

Different types of benefits

Before the next monthly physician meeting, Holden made sure he reviewed with his client's nursing staff the operational benefits of the hospital's computer connectivity product. He reaffirmed with the physician providers the convenience of being able to view both lab and imaging results of inpatients and outpatients on their hospital screen. He also brought up a strategic benefit of the lab's proximity; lab work collected throughout the day from the hospital's draw station as well as from the client's office would be processed immediately. This meant that specimens such as cultures would be plated in the afternoon, allowing for timely preliminary reporting and, thus, better patient care. This was in contrast to the incumbent lab that did not begin its testing until the late evening shift.

The relationship edge

Holden's experience had taught him that gaining respect was critical to his success. During his interactions with his potential customer, he showed confidence about his lab's capabilities and unique strengths. He also made people feel important by treating them as special. He always looked his client contacts in the eye, asked good questions of them, and listened intently to what they had to say. He understood the value of constructing a good relationship, starting with seeking common ground and progressing forward after several meetings; eventually, the nature of the discussion became more personal and his contacts were glad to see him. He always tried to provoke thought during his conversations. Past experience had convinced him that selling something was easier if he stimulated real thinking — without a relationship, the only thought in the contact's head is usually how quickly she can get rid of the sales rep, and Holden obviously did not want that.

The final outcome

Through his consistent relationship-building campaign, Holden was able to eventually wrest both the cytology and the clinical work from his competitor (despite the fact there were no major issues). He did this by:

- finding a coach (Orlando) who shared important information with him;
- building strong rapport with the providers and nurses by supplying educational material, asking questions, and being persistent;
- understanding the power hierarchy and how decisions were made;
- knowing that strategic and political benefits were the most compelling to those with decision-making capabilities;
- explaining the operational benefits of his lab service to the users;
- learning a great deal about the competition, and pointing out features and benefits that distinguished his hospital lab from the competition.

Holden's management of the account generated between \$25,000 and \$30,000 in net billings per month to the hospital, while he continued his quest to convert more accounts. He produced more than \$1.5 million net worth of business in a little over a year, which aided the hospital in making improvements within the laboratory. Indeed, the laboratory director, pathologists, and hospital administration knew they had made the right decision to institute a lab-outreach program. It enriched not only the hospital's reputation, but also brought in revenue which enhanced the laboratory with state-of-the-art equipment, and which, ultimately, improved patient care. □

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