

Getting the word out

Innovation keeps Avera McKennan marketing on the cutting edge

BY DONNA FARRIS, AVERA MCKENNAN WRITER/EDITOR

July 2009

In a competitive environment, Avera McKennan's marketing methods must be innovative, cutting-edge and ever-changing in order to inform consumers and help them make the best choice for their health care.



Look no further.

"With two top hospitals in a market this size, we must do a good job of setting ourselves apart and communicating our key points of distinction," said Michelle Lavallee, senior vice president of Marketing and Strategic Communication at Avera McKennan. "What makes Avera McKennan a good choice?"

Avera is distinguished by attributes of providing quality care near home, as well as its mission of health care ministry. "People come to us because they know they will get high quality care at a good value, along with the mission that's attached to us," Lavallee said.

Hospital marketing is a relatively new phenomenon. Before the late 1970s, this function was limited to community relations events, like hosting a holiday tea or fund-raising bazaar. Advertising was seen as unethical.

Marketing 30 product lines

"Marketing a hospital now is very much like marketing a company like Proctor & Gamble. Here at Avera McKennan we have 30 product lines, such as women's services, surgery, pediatrics or cancer care," Lavallee said. Yet marketing has a wider role than promoting the various products of health care. "The whole mission of marketing is to positively impact the perception of Avera McKennan for all our key constituencies – patients, physicians, employees, media and the community in general."

Success is measured by indicators such as market share, patient volumes, patient satisfaction scores and favorable news coverage. For example, since 2000, Avera McKennan's market share has continually gained ground, and in 2007

reached dominant market share at 50.01%, based on combined hospital discharges of Avera McKennan and the Avera Heart Hospital of South Dakota. In 2008, Avera market share was measured by the South Dakota Association of Healthcare Organizations at 50.42%, also based on Avera McKennan and Avera Heart Hospital discharges.

"Marketing's role is to think from the customer perspective. We have to be the biggest advocate for understanding what patients want and how to effectively communicate with them," Lavallee said.

A three-pronged approach

How does the Avera McKennan marketing staff accomplish this? It takes a three-pronged approach of account management, creative services and media and community relations. The account management team keeps in touch with leaders from product lines and facilitates marketing needs such as ads, websites, brochures or billboards. Creative Services fulfills these needs through writing, graphic design and printing.

When Lavallee joined Avera McKennan in 2006, she began restructuring the marketing department to meet the growing demands of the organization. That included developing an in-house "agency" to creatively write, design and publish marketing materials. "We have been able to save over \$890,000 this year by insourcing versus outsourcing." Lavallee also built upon Avera McKennan's popular Ask-A-Nurse program, expanding it to a 24-hour Medical Call Center.

"THE WHOLE MISSION OF MARKETING IS TO POSITIVELY IMPACT THE PERCEPTION OF AVERA MCKENNAN FOR ALL OUR KEY CONSTITUENCIES." – MICHELLE LAVALLEE, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR MARKETING AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

The media and community relations arm works with local news agencies to pitch and facilitate news stories. Health information or stories presented in articles or TV spots is known in marketing circles as “earned media.”

Mitch Krebs, assistant vice president for Media and Community Relations, said the value of earned media typically totals over \$1 million. This includes coverage about new or expanded health care services, health care issues, involvement in emergencies such as accidents and human interest stories. “We at Avera McKennan get the incredible experience of saving or enhancing the gift of life, every day,” Krebs said. “When someone is willing to tell their story about the great care they received at Avera McKennan, it carries a lot more weight with consumers than an ad or 30-second TV spot.”

Avera McKennan has an ongoing partnership with KSFY News to produce the Avera Medical Minute segment three times each week. Housecalls is a former radio program which is now presented as a podcast on the Avera McKennan website.

Community relations involves developing partnerships in the community, for example, with Hy-Vee, KSFY, the YWCA and Sioux Falls Catholic Schools, as well as sponsoring events.

Look No Further

Yet the landscape is continually shifting. After 20 years of having the tagline “Caring for Life,” Avera switched in 2007 to “Look No Further.”

Web offers a world of marketing opportunities



In the not too distant past, hospital marketing tactics focused on the printed page in brochures, ads or flyers. Today, the emphasis is shifting to the web.

“We’re driving everything to the web,” said Michelle Lavallee, senior vice president for Marketing and Strategic Communication. The Avera McKennan website is a “virtual brochure” about Avera McKennan and its various service lines. It’s also a place where visitors can do extensive research about health topics, see pictures of new babies, take virtual tours, pay their hospital bill, e-mail patients, sign up to receive a free monthly e-newsletter, listen to podcasts, watch videos and more.

“As our website has expanded, unique visitors to the Avera McKennan website have climbed 111% in two years,” Lavallee said.

“More people are getting on the web for health care communications,” said Jamey Zerr, Avera McKennan webmaster. Specialized websites, for programs such as the Avera McKennan Community Weight Loss Challenge and Avera Race Against Breast Cancer, draw visitors from a wider circle. The website is becoming more interactive, said Russ McKnight, Avera McKennan director of creative services.

Product or facility tours have evolved from simple slide shows to self-guided virtual tours. Videos give potential patients a more personal introduction to physicians. Health tools, calculators and risk assessments let people interactively learn about their risk for high blood pressure, cancer, heart attack, stroke and more.

Beyond Avera McKennan’s website, the Internet provides another vehicle for advertising and marketing. Internet advertising for the Avera Behavioral Health Center in 2009 garnered a national award through the Web Marketing Association.

The award-winning campaign included new features to promote the Avera Behavioral Health Center, including a mental health awareness tool to help break the stigma of mental illness, and a meditation tool to promote the center’s mission of creating a peaceful, healing environment.

The online campaign utilized popup ads on the Google search engine which appeared as sponsored links next to search results for behavioral health topics. It targeted parents of children with mental health conditions who would be willing to travel to get the best care. This campaign doubled site traffic, bringing more than 200 new visitors per day. Equally impressive, the behavioral health call center reported a 62% increase in call traffic during the online marketing campaign.

“The Avera Behavioral Health Center is different than a lot of other service lines we have at Avera McKennan in that its audience expands beyond the Avera footprint,” said marketing representative Kristen Townsend.

Yet lessons learned in the national campaign, for example targeting consumers through use of key words on a search engine, will have applications for local and regional web advertising as well, Townsend said.

“Caring for Life’ is a wonderful theme, but we realized it was not sufficient to represent all we do at Avera. Patients expect their health provider to be caring. We needed our tagline to represent that we offer something more,” Lavallee said.

Research proved that people believe Avera excels at providing quality care near home. “Look No Further” means that Avera provides high-quality care near home with world-class expertise and technological sophistication, so people need “look no further” for excellent care, and save themselves the drive to more distant destinations. “Our next step is to communicate our vision for the future – what we hope to become,” Lavallee said.

Societal shifts mandate changes in marketing strategies and tactics. For example, long-standing print mediums are losing ground to the Internet. Younger consumers are increasingly web savvy, and would rather peruse a website than read through a printed brochure. Economics is a factor too. Web marketing costs only pennies per contact, whereas printed brochures, billboards and print advertising are more costly.

Even print ads feature a line which ads of yesteryear did not – a website address and the 1-877-AT-AVERA number as a call to action.

Traditionally, people haven’t thought much about hospitals until they became sick. “We want to help people stay well and live well. That includes helpful information on our website, and health-risk assessments that help people determine their risk for disease using a simple, online tool,” Lavallee said.

Newest frontier

The newest frontier is social media.

“Sites like Facebook, Twitter and You Tube are truly some of the most exciting developments in marketing in 30 years,” Lavallee said.

Avera McKennan is sponsor of the new Living Well Community – a social media site similar to a local version of Web MD. Physicians, patients and consumers can openly discuss, share insights and blog about various health care topics. “Research shows that people rely on their own peers and cohorts for information. Providing this channel is another way we can communicate with potential patients,” Lavallee said.

This concept is unique in health care. “We’re on the front lines with this, and leading the way.” Lavallee said. Whether it’s for employee recruitment, or patient communications, a Facebook page and You Tube channel give Avera McKennan added presence. “The innovation is in reaching people where they live and interact,” Lavallee said.



AVERA MCKENNAN MARKETING-BY THE NUMBERS

\$1 million

Value of earned media in newspaper and magazine articles and TV spots

400

Average number of jobs processed each month by the Avera McKennan Print Shop

75,000

Calls received annually by the Avera McKennan 24-hour Medical Call Center

85,000

Average number of visits to Avera McKennan’s website each month

87

Number of accounts managed by marketing representatives

23

Average number of media inquiries per month

“LOOK NO FURTHER” MEANS THAT AVERA PROVIDES HIGH-QUALITY CARE NEAR HOME WITH WORLD-CLASS EXPERTISE AND TECHNOLOGICAL SOPHISTICATION.

Social media fosters positive word of mouth

Marketing tactics abound, but there's still no better advertising than positive word of mouth.

"Social media is the online version of word of mouth," said Paul Ten Haken, president of Click Rain, Inc., an online marketing firm based in Sioux Falls and consultant to Avera McKennan. "The trend in all industries has shifted dramatically to social media, and health care is no exception. People trust other people's opinions."

Social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, allow people to comment, blog interact and form associations. "People have a voice now more than ever before, and that voice is the web," Ten Haken said.

Facebook has more than 200 million users nationwide. Avera McKennan first gained a presence on Facebook through a nurse, who titled her page "Working at Avera and loving it."

Now, Avera McKennan has a fan page. It's another way potential employees and potential patients can learn more about Avera McKennan in a social setting.

"Sites like Facebook are not intended for advertising or public relations. They exist for making social connections. But it's good for companies to personalize themselves, take off the corporate jacket and communicate on a more personal level. Considering the amount of time consumers spend on Facebook, it's a brand presence – a stake in the ground,"

Ten Haken said. "It shows a willingness to connect with consumers in their community of choice."

Twitter is considered one of the fastest growing social networks. It is a micro-blogging tool, through which users can send 140-character messages or "tweets." Those messages go to anyone signed up to follow a certain blogger.

Avera McKennan uses tweets to send public relations messages or links to news releases because local media more and more are gathering news tips through Twitter.

"Rather than checking the fax machine for news releases, news reporters are looking to Twitter," Ten Haken said.

The Living Well Community is a new local web community for the Sioux Falls region for discussions on health care topics, sponsored by Avera McKennan. It's the only known site of its kind sponsored by a hospital or health care organization.

Anyone is invited to sign up and join the discussion at www.LivingWellCommunity.com. It's a place where patients, consumers and health care professionals can interact and connect on a range of health topics. Members can participate in discussions, watch videos, start a discussion group, read or write blogs, get health tips, read the latest health news and much more.

It's not an "official" communication of Avera McKennan. Yet it's hoped that people can get to know Avera experts or learn more about Avera services as the discussion unfolds.

"For any company, there is going to be discussion going on about you somewhere on the world wide web," said Kristen Townsend, marketing representative. "We want to be part of that discussion."

LivingWellCommunity.com

An online community dedicated to regional health and wellness

Log on. Live well.



MKTG-5527-REVMR2309

"THE TREND IN ALL INDUSTRIES HAS SHIFTED DRAMATICALLY TO SOCIAL MEDIA, AND HEALTH CARE IS NO EXCEPTION. PEOPLE TRUST OTHER PEOPLE'S OPINIONS."
– PAUL TEN HAKEN, PRESIDENT OF CLICK RAIN, INC., AN ONLINE MARKETING FIRM