

Aligning the Health Care Organization to Keep Your Brand Promises

By: Michelle Stuffmann
Brand Strategist
310.312.2255
mstuffmann@siegelgale.com

www.siegelgale.com

Health care organizations are increasingly developing consumer-focused brand identities. While there is a solid business case for this shift, it's simply not enough to develop a positioning that evokes high-level emotional themes. Your positioning must be a promise. Defining a promise that is distinct from competitors is challenging enough, but the bigger challenge is to consistently deliver on it. Aligning promise and delivery in health care is a complex and delicate exercise because when a health care company fails to keep its promise—nearly always related to a consumer's well-being—the consumer tends to take it *very personally*.

+ ACCORDING TO A 2006 STUDY
PUBLISHED IN THE JOURNAL OF
BRAND MANAGEMENT, ORGANIZATIONS
CAN LOSE UP TO 40% OF THEIR
MARKETING INVESTMENT WHEN
EMPLOYEES DO NOT DELIVER ON THE
ORGANIZATION'S PROMISES.

— Journal of Brand Management, 14, 2006

Consider the recent case of a large, national insurance provider, whose promise is articulated through a symbolic service mark that dramatically illustrated a link to wellness and a caring organizational approach. The company declined a request by a 17-year-old leukemia patient for a liver transplant, because the procedure was deemed experimental. The attending physicians disagreed, which led the family to believe that the insurance company wanted to sidestep responsibility in an effort to control costs. Not surprisingly, this action was interpreted to be the antithesis of the brand's promise, and this incensed consumers and stimulated unwanted media attention. While it is likely that the incident was based on valid business decision systems, the viability of the brand was compromised by the disconnect in promise and practice. It's possible that the controversy could have been averted if those who were empowered to make these decisions had the proper tools and information to behave and communicate in a "branded" way.

A company's front-line employees—those who directly interact with customers—are the promise keepers. Unfortunately, they are often not the promise makers. According to a 2006 study published in the Journal of Brand Management, organizations can lose up to 40% of their marketing investment when employees do not deliver on the organization's promises. So how do you ensure that your organization's actions deliver on expectations? That your promise is kept? The answer lies in brand alignment.

Brand alignment is a discipline that helps an organization eliminate disconnects between promise makers and promise keepers so that customers have the experience they're expecting. Getting aligned involves four key steps:

1. Make sure your employees know what promise they're expected to keep

A recent article in *Leadership Excellence* indicated that, on average, fewer than 20% of employees know their organization's business strategy. Even fewer can articulate the brand strategy.¹ But if your employees do not understand your organization's brand promise or how it should affect their daily job performance, how can they be expected to keep that promise?

Brand research demonstrates that customers' experience-based perceptions will prevail if external information and personal experience conflict.² Therefore, every front-line employee should know and understand the organization's brand promise. They should know why it is relevant. And they should have the tools to help them deliver on it. The most effective way to achieve these objectives is to evangelize with in-person training sessions. You can also prepare concise, instructive material on the brand promise for distribution throughout the company. The more opportunities you provide for your employees to understand the role and value of your brand promise, the better.

Mayo Clinic is an extraordinary example of an organization that ensures that everyone knows and understands how to deliver on their brand promise. Every employee receives a copy of the *Mayo Clinic Model of Care*, which specifies the organization's values, culture, and expectations and articulates their promise of "the needs of the patient come first." This document is more than just a sheet of paper—it is the credo by which everyone in the organization lives. Dr. David Herman, chair of the Clinical Practice Committee for the Rochester campus, explains, "We use the document as a country would use a constitution. It is the articulation of the principles that make the Mayo Clinic the Mayo Clinic. It is a rare meeting of the Executive Board or the Clinical Practice Committee [in which] the document is not specifically mentioned."³

Please note that your employees are a significant audience for your brand—once they understand the brand promise, they have a right to expect that the promise will be kept for them as well. The better your organization is able to keep the promise for employees, the more likely employees will be inspired to deliver on the promise in their daily activities.

2. Identify your touch points—all of them

As marketers, we tend to think about touch points as vehicles for delivering marketing messages—advertising, marketing brochures, and websites. But if that's all you're considering, you're omitting critical touch points. Everything that the consumer experiences about your organization serves as a potential touch point. The first step toward identifying a comprehensive list of touch points is to walk through your customer experience *as a customer*. Beyond traditional experiences, such as how easily they can make an appointment or whether your facility is clean, this exercise should also include less obvious touch points, such as the volume and tone of your "hold" music, parking space availability, length of wait times, and lobby seat-

ing comfort and accessibility. The best way to get a comprehensive list of all your touch points is to gather a cross-functional team and ask each person to articulate the places where their function touches the customer.

3. Assess how you're performing at each of your touch points

Once you have your extensive list of touch points, you need to evaluate how each one is performing through the lens of the brand promise. This will help you prioritize your ongoing alignment efforts. As you evaluate, remember that the goal is to obtain an honest assessment of what's actually happening, not what's *supposed* to be happening. Most organizations have policies or codes of conduct in employee handbooks, but don't assume that because these rules exist on a page that they're consistently applied or followed.

The best way to accomplish this task is again to engage your employees—specifically, those who you've just trained on the brand promise. Ask them to help you judge how the organization is delivering on the promise at each touch point. They know, sometimes better than anyone, what the experience is *really* like.

4. Develop action plans for improving on-brand delivery on all your touch points

Once you've established where you're doing well and where you need to improve, then you must fine-tune all your touch points. Have your managers create specific improvement plans for the touch points that fall under their purview. Ask front-line employees to think of ways to improve how they deliver on the brand promise. Because they're being asked to help, they'll be more personally invested in making the required changes—and they'll be happier about them too.

Washington Mutual provides a great example of rethinking a touch point to better deliver on a brand promise. While many of their competitors are trying to get people *not* to come inside the bank, WaMu is delivering a completely new branch experience they call Occasio™, which brings people out from behind the bulletproof glass to interact more personally with customers. This innovative approach powerfully delivers on the WaMu brand of "putting people first" by making the experience about the people, not the financial transaction.

Delivering on your brand promise is not always easy. It requires thoughtfulness about everything the organization does and a dedication to considering every action through the lens of the brand. But in the long run, creating an experience that aligns with your audiences' expectations—a place where the words and the actions match—is a win-win for everyone.

1 Schiemann, W.A. (2007). *Aligning People, Leadership Excellence*, 24, 20.

2 Berry, L. L., & Seltman, K. D. (2007). *Building a strong services brand: Lessons from Mayo Clinic*. *Business Horizons*, 50, 199-209.

3 *Ibid.*

Michelle brings over 15 years of experience in brand strategy, marketing, design, and advertising to her role leading projects at Siegel+Gale. She has helped clients across a wide range of industries and has worked with a variety of brands, including Nestle', Twentieth Century Fox, Capital Group Companies, CBS, and Nissan North America.