

Bringing Your Service Lines Online

By David Sternberg

As healthcare organizations and hospitals continue to move up the “e” learning curve, they are continually looking for new ways to make better use of their online assets and investments. One growing trend is to use their consumer Internet sites more effectively in support of their strategic objectives for their service lines (aka centers of excellence). This article will provide you with insights as to what many leading healthcare organizations are doing to leverage Internet technology to support their strategic objectives.

Different approaches to Service Lines Online

In reviewing hundreds of hospital sites, some clear strategies emerge in regards to how hospital marketers are using their Web sites in support of their service lines. The most common strategy is still the “marketing brochure” online. In essence this involves taking the “Family Birthing Center” brochure or the “Heart Care Center” brochures, cutting them into Web pages and putting them on the site. Add a few links, an email or “contact us” button and that’s about it.

Another less common approach is to give the service line/center of excellence its own Web site. This involves more content, staff and physician profiles, maybe even some transactions such as online scheduling or appointment requests, newsletter and/or class sign-up, and a host of other online services.

Finally, a few organizations have gone even farther with their online strategies for one or more of their service lines. These organizations have made the commitment to integrate the Web within the fabric of their service line and clinical staff. For these organizations it is not about “What’s on our Web site?” instead they ask, “How can we use our Web site to support our strategic objectives for each of our service lines?”

Viewed this way, the healthcare organization’s site will still have the requisite content about the service line, but the “integrated” service line will have an important distinction. The focus will be on migrating “ownership” of the site from marketing or IS to the clinical staff within the service line. Staff education and training will result in their own ability and desire to use the Web as a patient communications tool. The same transactions described above become easier to implement and more successful when the online development is led by the clinical staff charged with doing these transactions offline! “Bringing” your services lines online is about bringing the clinical staff up the “e” learning curve, providing them with the tools and support to migrate more patient interactions to the Web, and helping them to begin using the Web as a new tool in their communications.

Think of when the fax machine was first introduced, it took a while to catch on and now no hospital, medical practice or insurance company could survive without an arsenal of them! It is certainly more difficult to develop Web services than to use a fax machine, but the rewards, applications, and opportunities are far greater as well.

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Common Strategic Objectives for Service Lines Online

What are your organization's strategic objectives for each of your centers of excellence? Increased market share? Reduced operating costs without hurting patient satisfaction rates? Higher quality care? Recruiting a given number of new physicians? Odd are at least one or more of these common strategic objectives resembles the ones on your strategic plan. So how can bringing your centers of excellence online support the attainment of these goals?

Matching Strategic Objectives to Tactics

There are a number of tactics that can be deployed on the Web. Examples of online tactics include everything from appointment scheduling to online bill payment to a health risk assessment to licensing a content library. So how does one choose tactics that will support their strategic objectives? One way is to use an evaluation matrix like the one in figure 1. By evaluating each of your possible tactics as to how much impact an effective implementation of the tactic will likely have on each the strategic objectives for your center of excellence, you should develop a clear picture as to which tactics should be prioritized for development. Weighting could be used if certain objectives are more important than others.

Figure 1: Evaluation Matrix

Objectives>>>> ∨ Tactics ∨	Increased Market Share	Reduced Costs	Improved Patient Satisfaction
Online Appointment Scheduling	**	*	**
Enhanced Content Library			*
Provide eMail Newsletter	*		**
Health Risk Assessment	**		**

Legend: Scale of 0 – 3 stars, with 3 stars representing the most impact to the objective

Measuring Success

Done properly, the process above will provide you with another important deliverable beyond a prioritized list of tactics to implement. In ascertaining the potential impact of each tactic, the group will naturally have to answer “why?” to support their assessments. The answers to this question can be transferred into a set of ROI measurements.

An example will help illustrate this. Let's assume your center of excellence has a strategic objective for revenue growth and your group brainstorming session resulted in ten or twenty possible tactics for their online center of excellence. Let's further assume that one of them is “Add Content Library” and another is “Provide eMail Newsletter”. The assessment in regards to how each of these tactics impacts the growth objective may be “none” and “some” respectively.

In answering “why?” the workgroup thinks the email newsletter tactic may have some impact to growth is based on the rationale that if it is of sufficient quality people will tell their physicians they appreciated getting it and their physicians may be more inclined to refer patients to your hospital. In addition, if you make it easy to do, the newsletter will get forwarded to others and they may actually develop enough of a positive feeling about your hospital to help impact their physician’s selection if they ever need your services. So measuring success would involve tracking the number of subscribers, the number of physician-generated subscribers, and the number of subscriber referrals. Each of these measurements can be easily tracked and therefore managed on a monthly or quarterly basis.

Conclusion

Important takeaways from this article are, 1) the Web can be much more than an online brochure about your centers of excellence, 2) there are easy methods for matching online tactics to strategic objectives, and 3) effectively using the Web to support your service line objectives requires the active participation of your clinical staff. The overall promise of eHealth is higher quality care and more satisfied patients at less total costs. At the end of the day, it seems logical that the only way to achieve this is by truly *bringing* your centers of excellence online.

Action Items

1. Assess your service line strategic objectives and determine whether an online strategy can help achieve them
2. If the answer is yes, working with your service line clinical staff leadership determine which online tactics are most likely to support your goals
3. With highest priority tactics determined, use your service line’s clinical staff as the driving force behind the development and implementation efforts

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