

CARING

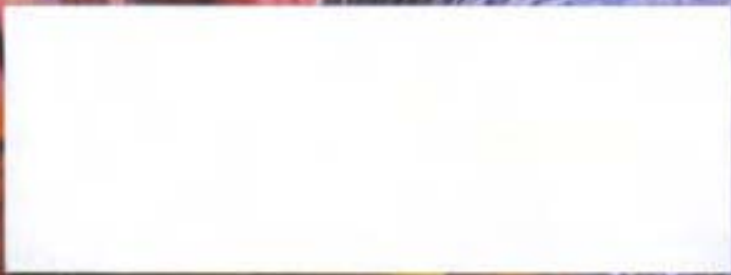


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The Growth of
Private Pay:
Customized
Care at Home



How and Why Marketing Efforts for Private Duty Services Are Unique

By Merrily Orsini



Within any industry, strategic marketing and communicating services play a vital role in any business' success. Adequately marketing who you are and what you do to the right people results in their understanding your brand and your offerings and voila! More business. The same basic concepts apply to the home care industry.

Since under this umbrella there are various types of agencies (agencies that care for patients whose payers are Medicare, Medicaid, and private duty agencies, most often paid by the patients themselves), marketing can be complicated. Because home care agencies vary in services provided and how they receive reimbursement, marketing targets and messages for each agency will vary considerably.

Key Elements to Successful Marketing

The key to successfully marketing home care and home health agencies at its most basic is understanding the specific types of an agency's target audience. The messaging associated with the type of agency must resonate within the targeted audience, and the visuals must complement that targeted messaging. Within the Medicare and Medicaid marketing spectrum in which funding is provided from a federally regulated, third-party source, messaging and marketing must be designed to reach extremely specific audiences. In many cases, this marketing strategy involves sales designed with an educational and patient-centered approach and on-site visits with potential referral sources. These approaches can happen since the relationships between the provider agencies and the referral sources have been in place for a long time and are usually well defined.

For private duty agencies, however, the target is a much broader audience of a variety of publics: the individual patient; family or friends; church and community agencies; and a whole range of referral sources. Therefore, aggressive strategic marketing techniques, not necessarily just direct sales visits, are the key to success.

In home care, the word "marketing" has often been linked with "sales". Anecdotally, it is rumored that the reason that marketing and sales have a negative connotation by home care nurses is that they don't see this as their role or that health care providers need to "sell" their services.

Marketing is, however, much more than making sales calls, dropping off promotional items, and keeping contact lists. It begins with developing a strategy, then adding branding, which contains all activities and designs that accompany any effort to promote an agency to its publics – whether those publics are clients, patients, the community, referral sources, or the health industry in general.

What is it about Private Duty That Makes It So Different?

Private duty services are basically any supportive type of services. They run the gamut from errands and transportation, to companionship, personal care, and nursing. Basically, whatever services someone needs to stay at home, or to supplement care in a facility for which they have the resources to pay, can fall under private duty or privately paid services. There is not usually a doctor's order needed, nor is there necessarily even a medical component to the services. The definition of private duty is therefore hard, as it really can be any type of service that is provided to someone who is frail or elderly to allow that person to have more independence in his or her lifestyle or choice of living situation.

In most states, private duty agencies do not face the strict licensing and regulatory requirements imposed on agencies providing Medicare services. As mentioned above, this means that private duty and private pay agencies can provide an incredibly wide range of services; from concierge, housekeeping, meal preparation, companion care, and personal care, all the way to nursing and geriatric care management, to name only a few of the possibilities. Even in states where licensing for private duty is now in place, the licensure is oftentimes more of a requirement to meet some minimum standards, rather than a strict licensure that compares with the Medicare licensing criteria. Because of this, rather than one target audience, private duty agencies have a variety of different groups to which they can selectively market. Anyone who interfaces with an aging or frail audience, from clergy to trust officers, from dentists to pharmacists, from funeral home directors to real estate agents, all may be a potential referral source for one who comes to them and presents a need for advice for in-home or long-term care.

How to Market Private Duty

In most cases, private duty clients are frail or ill and are usually suffering from a chronic illness. Oftentimes, they come to a private duty agency from a referral outside of the health care delivery system. Frequently, assistance for care is sought in an emergency situation, when a client's current

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care system has failed or the need for care is immediate. Examples of this are when a spouse or other caregiver becomes ill or has to leave the home for some personal reason, or when an unexpected accident, fall, or illness occurs. It is for this reason that private duty is considered an at-need service, one that is only sought out when a care need becomes present. This means private duty marketing must be planned from various approaches.

Target Referral Sources. The most successful method for marketing private duty services is to target the potential referral sources to whom a client or family might turn for advice and assistance. Because the need for care is oftentimes imminent, the client's decision-makers, such as family members, neighbors, friends, or trustees, are forced to make an informed, major home-care decision but might not understand their options. Questions arise such as:

- Does Medicare cover the needed care?
- Am I eligible for Medicaid?
- Will I have to pay out-of-pocket?
- Do I need a geriatric care manager or other professional to assist in assessing need?

These are all questions that can be overwhelming to someone thrust into the decision-making process without warning or prior knowledge.

When marketing their services, a common mistake private duty agencies often make is focusing their efforts directly to the client – after all, in many cases it is the client's resources that fund the services. This is a logical, but misguided assumption as it is usually someone else who makes the decision for care, and private duty funds can come from a number of other sources, including:

- Family members' resources;
- Long-term care insurance;
- Grants for supplemental hospice care;
- Worker's Compensation insurance; and
- Trust accounts, trustees, or guardians.

Focus Your Marketing Message. Targeting a wide range of potential private duty referral sources is a positive start, but to truly reap the results of increased referrals, the

marketing messaging used must be focused, branded, educational, and consistent. Because few people understand the options specific to care needs, even those in referral roles, it is even more important that an agency position itself as a helpful resource for when a care need arises. Understanding when each type of home care is appropriate and what and how other resources can assist in decisions is key to making an appropriate referral.

Market Quality Inside and Outside the Agency. Private pay in-home care must deliver the highest quality services available – a message that should resonate not only in all agency marketing communications, but also in agency operations. When people are paying out-of-pocket for services, quality expectations are unusually high. What this translates into is a finely tuned agency mechanism that responds immediately to requests for assistance and to problem situations, exhibits high levels of professionalism, and showcases expertise and commitment.

Since many services are long-term in nature, the initial match between caregiver and client is paramount to a successful case. That success depends on an agency's ability to assess the client's situation correctly, having an ample supply of caregivers who, in addition to the required skill sets for the job, are also available at varying hours with reliable transportation. Then there is the match for personality characteristics. Talkative, quiet, formal or informal, and uniformed or not, all have to be considered when matching client and caregiver. So the placement of caregiver(s) with clients adds an additional level to "quality" that is beyond anything measurable in the industry.

Provide Geriatric Care Management. One way to catapult a private duty agency to the next level of success is to add geriatric care management as a component of intake, assessment, and ongoing client care management. A valuable asset to private pay home care, a geriatric care manager delivers suggested solutions tailored to the needs and situation of each client. A geriatric care manager takes into consideration each client's prognosis for care, the client's informal and formal support systems, and available financial resources. Having a care manager on staff is an additional boost to marketing, as the care manager can assess a potential case, and serves to sell agency services if appropriate.

Employ Creative Marketing Strategies. Since most new business is driven by referrals, private duty home care agencies must engage in the following marketing strategies to ensure they stay on the radar of their referral sources:

- Establish a clear branding and concise messaging that stresses what factors differentiate their agency from the competition;
- Implement a monthly marketing communications program that, serving as an educational vehicle specific to referral sources, positions the agency as an expert in care; and
- Provide helpful resources and assistance in meeting care needs to those referral sources and their referrals. Offering assistance in meeting care needs, even if those needs do not result in a private duty client, results in a satisfied referral source who may refer again when a care need presents itself.

What Marketing and Communications Tactics or Resources Work to Position an Agency as an Expert in the Marketplace?

- First and foremost, the agency brand needs to be prominent. It needs to be based on whatever differentiates the agency in the market. Every piece of material that the agency uses, from in-home timesheets to name tags, needs to be consistently branded with the agency logo, colors, and selected font.
- Media placement of tips, trends, and case examples of successful in-home care bylined by the agency administrator or owner is the best way to position the agency and the person bylined as an expert.
- Third party credibility is a key component to positioning the agency as an expert. A regular column in a local paper that covers a targeted geographic area, authored

Tips for Successfully Marketing Private Duty Services

Construct a branded, professionally-designed Web site that is regularly updated and contains design and text features that are built using organic Search Engine Optimization techniques.

The brochure used to be "king" in marketing, but most home care searches are now done on the Internet. The Web site should be easy to navigate and aesthetically pleasing, and serve not as an avenue for sales, but as a valuable source for information, tips, resources, and assistance for those who have a care need, and introduce agency management to the searcher. Then immediately a personal relationship can start in the impersonal Internet world.

Offer information that is helpful to those seeking care, and used to educate in the community as often as possible.

This can be in the form of PowerPoint presentations, handouts, or lists on flip charts. The goal is to answer the questions people have on services and to be helpful in answering care need questions, not in selling services. A print or emailed newsletter targeted to referrals and inquirers can simply keep interested parties informed of resources and events. It is an excellent way to educate and keep the agency name on its viewers' immediate radar.

Assign a person to answer the phone who knows how to take an inquiry.

This is probably the most important item eluding most agencies. When a call comes in for assistance, it is a make-or-break-it opportunity to engage a potential client or referral source, and to make an impression as an agency with knowledge that pays close attention to the caller's needs and questions.

Prepare product sheets that describe services, display prices, and show testimonials.

If an agency has differentiated itself from the competition, clarifies what services it offers that demonstrate its unique capabilities, education, and experience, then the service offerings will be in line. For instance, if an agency offers concierge services, then that customer focus to help in a wide range of needs should be showcased. If an agency specializes in care for a confused or memory-impaired person, then the way it can best provide this service will be in caregiver training and client education. Product sheets should show the agency brand, and are used to specifically address an inquiry for service, so that follow-up is immediate and targeted to the inquirer.

Certain marketing techniques simply do not work in private duty. One such example is direct mail that is targeted to demographics, like income, age, and geography.... Direct mail does work, however, for potential referral sources who might be on the lookout for new resources, or information on specific issues relating to aging.

by the agency, is better than advertising to build credibility in the eyes of your community.

- Presentations on a variety of home care, aging, or pediatric topics (whatever targets the agency serves) are another way to position as an expert. Civic Clubs, organizational meetings, senior fairs, baby fairs -- all these provide ample opportunity to present on helpful educational topics that solve a problem or give information on how to use in-home care as a solution. Along with these presentations, some advance publicity can be garnered through local media, industry or neighborhood publications, and email announcements.
- eNewsletters or printed and mailed newsletters in formats that are educational and informational also work to position the agency as an industry expert.
- In short, any active communication that educates on a related topic to the target, accompanied by a takeaway that offers helpful tips and resources, is the key to positioning as an expert.

What Should You NOT Do in Marketing Your Private Duty Agency?

Certain marketing techniques simply do not work in private duty. One such example is direct mail that is targeted to demographics, like income, age, and geography. Why does that not work? The niche market of private duty services is so very small that direct mail is a very expensive way to try and reach someone. The chances your direct mail will hit the right person at the right time is like trying to catch a single goldfish swimming in the river. Frailty is not a feature of age, but rather of disease, or chronic illness, or obesity, or genetics. So even though a wealthy section of town may be the target audience, the chances of finding someone in that area who a) is wealthy; b) has a care need that is not met; and c) might be interested based on a direct mail piece, are extremely slim.

Direct mail does work, however, for potential referral sources who might be on the lookout for new resources, or information on specific issues relating to aging. Referrals

control the flow of business in private pay services, not the actual patients. Actual clients will make referrals if the service they receive is good, but that is the only reason they refer and not because of any marketing collateral.

Another traditional marketing area that does not work in private duty is advertising. Most media advertising space is expensive. It is nearly impossible to get a good return on your investment. People who need care simply do not choose an agency based upon an ad. It is far better to spend advertising dollars on media relations, community presentations, or sponsorships of chronic disease association events, than on media advertisements. An exception would be neighborhood or industry targeted publications that already have the target audience as their readership, and the yellow pages.

Conclusion

There is no question that the demand for care services will increase in years to come, especially within the private pay arena, since the clear preference is to remain in one's home while receiving care. In light of this potential flood of new clients entering the marketplace to search for in-home services, it has never been more important to understand the strategy behind marketing to the private duty/private pay client, and even more important to understand that those marketing efforts must be different from efforts to market Medicare and Medicaid services. To enjoy success, private duty agencies simply must understand their target audiences, analyze how they can differentiate themselves, and then use these factors to market effectively. This allows the precious, valuable time and scarce resources to be spent on target marketing that yields referrals and, ultimately, results.



About the Author: *Merrily Orsini, MSSW, is managing director of corecubed, an integrated marketing communications company that specializes in home care and home health industries. Merrily has been active in internet marketing since 1990. She is an 18-year veteran of the private duty industry and currently serves on the advisory board of the Private Duty Homecare Association of America.*