

Health-care Membership Programs: A Tactic to Cultivate New Patients

A CASSLING WHITE PAPER

Belonging to a club with members that share common interests creates a strong bond of fellowship and loyalty. Hospitals and health-care facilities have implemented this strategy to generate patient affinity. Membership programs, also known as loyalty or wellness programs, create opportunities for health-care organizations to become involved in the community while reinforcing their position as a leading health-care resource. When managed carefully, these clubs can help you develop a valuable and ultimately profitable patient relationship.

Members Now, Patients Later

Organizations are looking for ways to gain loyalty with the 79 million aging baby boomers that make decisions not just for themselves, but also for their children and their aging parents. Fostering a sense of commitment with this age group early on will likely lead to increased patient volume later when they need health care.

The most popular hospital membership clubs tend to be geared toward the 50 plus age group. However, boomers tend to avoid products or services with a “senior” label and are difficult to lure into programs branded for older audiences.

One way to overcome this barrier is to offer programs tailored to both the young and old spectrums of this generation. For example, provide yoga classes in addition to estate planning workshops. Schedule programs during lunch hours, evenings or on weekends to make it easier for working boomers to attend. Giving the program a generic name such as “Health Connection” also will broaden the club’s appeal.

You also may consider segmenting health and wellness clubs specifically for children, men and women with special events and member perks tailored to each audience.

- Kids club members can enjoy growth charts, healthy snack ideas and games encouraging activity.
- Men can take advantage of nutrition counseling, team sports activities and programs related to men’s health issues, such as prostate cancer and testosterone therapy.
- Specialized programming for women can include weight loss and nutrition, anti-aging, heart health, body image and menopause, combined with fun opportunities to socialize and relax.

Member Benefits

Male or female, young or old, discounts are one of the most attractive benefits of a hospital membership program. Consider offering discounts related to:

- Cafeteria and gift shop purchases.
- Products from health system outlets that are not covered by insurance, such as prescription drugs, eyeglasses, hearing aids and durable medical equipment.
- Products and services from community businesses that target club member demographics, such as a grocery store, sporting goods store, toy store or restaurants that offer healthy menu options.
- On-site fitness classes or gym memberships.

Creative and educational programming also is an essential component of a strong membership program. Make sure you offer a range of activities that appeal to a broad audience:

- Group outings and travel opportunities
 - » Organize day trips to outdoor attractions, concerts, festivals and museums. Many clubs provide transportation or contract directly with a travel agency that organizes the trips. A registered nurse (RN) should be present to answer questions on a variety of health-related topics that may arise during the outing.
- Exercise and nutrition programs
 - » Golf tournaments, indoor and outdoor walking clubs, health screenings and fairs, cooking and exercise classes and nutrition counseling provide tools and opportunities to encourage a healthy lifestyle.
- Art classes and book clubs encourage members to keep their mind healthy in addition to their body.
- Wine, cookie and coffee tastings provide opportunities for social interaction.

Club members also may enjoy computer classes, financial counseling, insurance or medical claims workshops and lectures hosted by professors and physicians. Event ideas can come from:

- Area businesses.
- Pharmacy and medical companies.
- Nearby academic institutions and community and government organizations.
- Retirement and independent living facilities.
- Input from members via an online poll through your club's Web site or through informal surveys.

Promoting Your Program

Publicize upcoming events and club benefits through a dedicated club Web site (or on a special page on your organization's Web site) and offer a newsletter complete with a calendar of events and health-care tips. Offset newsletter production costs by offering advertising space to community businesses and program partners. In addition, ask them to help market club events through sending a notice to their e-mail list or by posting fliers.

Free or Fee?

Charging a club membership fee depends on your organizational goals. Free affinity programs can generate larger membership databases than those that charge, but charging a small fee may increase members' sense of investment in the hospital. Donations and fundraising campaigns can help support administrative costs to maintain the membership program.

Remember to Measure

In the end, offering all of these fun events and services should show some form of benefit. Some administrators consider program costs to be low relative to potential increases in downstream revenue, according to the Advisory Board Company.

Membership may attract prospective patients as well. The Advisory Board Company reported that nearly 20 percent of members in one case had never used a health system facility at the time of joining.

Whether you choose to track the number of members who are new hospital users or monitor revenue generated by members utilizing inpatient and outpatient services, setting measurement metrics will help you determine the viability of the program.

To measure the program's health-related impact, consider asking members to monitor their body mass index (BMI), blood pressure or other health indicators. Surveying club members for feedback at regular intervals (and implementing their suggestions) will help to ensure that your club is providing meaningful benefits and nurturing a profitable relationship.

