

Techniques to determine YOUR competitive advantage

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How successfully have you been able to analyze your competitive advantage relative to location, service, price, product and qualifications? If you have not yet found your marketing niche, some other areas to explore are instrumentation, customers served, percentage of market share and resourcefulness.

Do you think you can use technology to differentiate your services in the marketplace? Does your competition have acoustic resonance imaging equipment; electro-acoustic hearing instrument measuring equipment; computerized audiometers, tympanometry and/or assistive listening devices? You can change the perception of your office by creating a hi-tech image. Offer a computerized evaluation of potential customers' current hearing instruments, a test of hearing instrument battery life and special diagnostic hearing tests.

In order to see if a technological differentiation is appropriate for your office, it is necessary to analyze your customer base and describe the type of individual currently being serviced by your business. Are you attracting a wealthy "carriage trade" population? Is this reflective of the area in which you are located or is there some service or image that has attracted this clientele. The easiest way to find out is by asking your customers how they chose to come to your office. This will provide you with some insights about continuing this approach or attempting to obtain new avenues to explore. If they have come because of the amount of time you spend with them, the professional way they are treated and so forth, then you should evaluate your advertisements and promotions to determine if this type of information is highlighted as benefits for your clients. By reviewing your target area, you may find that there are underserved population groups. Perhaps, a focused campaign with a revised image would be more appropriate to reach these potential customers. Your resourcefulness and creativity are primary assets in deciding the direction of your business.

A further review of **the competitive levels** of the other hearing instrument dis-

pensers in your area will provide additional insights as to your potential for making or maintaining a specific position. Is there one dispenser that controls a large percentage of your market area? This would be a **dominant or strong** facility that controls the behavior of the other competitors or can take independent action. The next level is considered **favorable**. These dispensers can exploit certain areas/niche markets, like fitting lawyers, hunters, etc. These businesses

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also have the opportunities to improve their positions. The **tenable** level is for businesses that are satisfactorily maintaining status quo; however, they may find it difficult to make improvements and create a new and improved image. Then there are the **weak** or nonviable. In order to succeed, these offices must change and alter their course. These are potential takeover situations for a more aggressive dispenser.

To demonstrate how to analyze your competitive advantage, let's look at a small bedroom community outside of a large metropolitan area. A dispensing audiologist has just purchased an office from a hearing instrument specialist. Within a seven-mile radius there are four other dispensing offices. One is a franchise dispenser with audiologists on staff. The office is the dominant market leader in the area. Promotions, direct mail and advertising are its key tactics.

The second dispenser, at the favorable level of competition, is a hearing instrument specialist, who has been in the area for 40 years and uses this as a reliability factor in marketing its services. The next group are dispensing audiologists who work with otolaryngologists. They also are at the favorable competitive level but in a niche market. They provide service essentially on referral from the physicians and do not advertise. The fourth office is operated by a part-time private practice audiologist whose business is tenable to weak. The

business operates with a low overhead and has focused on a low price strategy.

In determining where to position the new office, the decision was made to focus on coupling the assets of highly technical and professional expertise with an independent practice that is responsive to patients' needs. Care had to be taken to make this plan a slow transition, to maintain a comfort level for the current user base.

A resourceful technique that combined the use of modern technology with the goal of responsiveness to patient's needs was the use of a beeper system. In this way, the dispenser demonstrated the availability of 24-hour service, dependability and a caring attitude.

Another tactic was to broaden the base of professional referrals. In view of the strength of the otology group and their strong affiliation with primary referral sources, it was necessary to reach the more peripheral specialists like the cardiologist, ophthalmologist, neurologist, oncologist, in addition to the general/family practitioner, internist and pediatrician.

Any new physician in the community was immediately contacted and given information about the hearing services offered by this office. At the same time, techniques for cross-marketing with brochures from each office were discussed and referral pads were provided.

Current patients were asked for the names of all of their physicians and these doctors were sent information regarding their mutual clients that explained how to overcome the communication barriers which might interfere with treatment. Follow-up phone calls were made to discuss the patient and at the same time describe the type of services the dispenser could offer to this physician's patients. Use of the client's name offered an opportunity to bypass the gatekeeper and speak directly with the doctor. Public relations programs like open house seminars on pertinent subjects such as tinnitus and hearing in noise also embellished the professional independent image of this office.

The analysis of the competition is a tool in establishing the uniqueness of your office. Your resourcefulness in using this information is the key to a successful practice. □