

Marketing the Occupational Therapy Professional in Malta

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This article is a brief version of an assignment presented for the module entitled *Management of Occupational Therapy* as part of the MSc programme for *Occupational Therapy at the University of East London*.

Occupational Therapy was formally established in America early in the twentieth century. Much progress has been made throughout the years outlining its particular objectives albeit gradually (Young, Quinn, 1992). The changes that occurred reflect the ever changing world in which we live. Occupational Therapy emerged in early history from a common belief held by a small group of people. Reilly (1962) places common belief into a hypothesis as follows *'that man, through the use of his mind and will, can influence the state of his own health.'*

The history of Occupational Therapy in other countries namely Canada, Australia and Britain parallels that of Occupational Therapy in the United States in many ways. Therapists the world over seek increased public recognition for their contribution to the health of the population. It is a well known fact that greater recognition will entail increased accountability and the need for research to validate theories underlying practice and account for effectiveness of services.

The introduction of Occupational Therapy in Malta started with the recruitment of foreign therapists (British) in 1955 and continued to develop with the engagement of the first Maltese therapists in 1974. For this purpose Maltese candidates were selected in 1970 and sent to England for training in 1971. The first two male Maltese therapists were appointed in October 1974. More Occupational therapists joined in 1982 after training in the United Kingdom. It was not until 1984 that the first locally organized course of training in Occupational Therapy was established (Busuttill, 1986). Courses are currently being held by the Institute of Health Care, University of Malta with an ever increasing demand for occupational therapists.

The Maltese attitude towards health is largely based on the medical model. For all ailments there is a cure to be sought at the local doctors. There are no shortages of doctors in Malta where they work either in a local community clinic or else

privately.

It is only in the last decade that the value of other professions has been appreciated. It is a common occurrence for Occupational Therapists to feel disheartened by the fact that few people know what an Occupational Therapist does. Whilst understanding that Occupational Therapy is not the only profession with this dilemma, it is vital that therapists dedicate some responsibility to establish the image of Occupational Therapy to the 'target market' i.e. the public and amongst other professions. Occupational Therapists should be clear regarding their specific roles in assessment, treatment, rehabilitation, promotion and maintenance of health.

There is a need to be confident when discussing areas of practice. There is a need to accept and outline the limitations that exist in occupational therapy as in all professions (Maslin, 1991).

Marketing was once thought inappropriate to use in health care. However, it is emerging as an important aspect of delivery of health care services, including Occupational Therapy over the world. Marketing techniques can be applied to the Maltese situation to improve valid recognition amongst other professions and increase public awareness.

Marketing as defined by Kotler (1976) is *'the set of human activities directed at facilitating and consummating exchanges.'* Butler (1991) describes marketing as both an activity and a business philosophy whilst Rodgers (1974) views marketing as primarily concerned with the creation, presentation and communication of what a firm has to offer. The firm's activities are therefore exposed to public criticism. Marketing Occupational Therapy will aim to present what the profession has to offer (e.g. restoring an individual to an independent lifestyle through adaptations within the home) and communicate its aims and values in a creative way.

Occupational Therapists in Malta consist in the vast majority of therapists working in the public sector. The health service in Malta is provided free of charge to all Maltese citizens.

We therefore are concerned with "relationship marketing" i.e. non-profit seeking marketing in the form of marketing communications and public relations.

Occupational Therapy can be marketed on two counts, firstly to other persons in the health services and secondly to the general public. For all intents and purposes we shall refer to persons in the health services (consultants, doctors, physiotherapists, social workers etc.) and the general public as customers.

Hart (1987) describes how any organization needs to develop a strategy. Prior to applying any form of strategy it is important to get to know the customers and the markets in which the service operates.

It is important to note that consumers vary in age, sex, class, occupational and geographical region. To market Occupational Therapy, it is therefore vital to understand and develop an awareness of consumer behavior (Butler, 1991). Successful marketing begins with preliminary market research. Since marketing aims at satisfying the customer, it is important to stay in touch with the need, wants and preferences of the consumers (Jacobs, 1987). Rather than designing services and then looking for customers, the reverse occurs in marketing the Occupational Therapy service. The market needs to be looked at and potential customers listened to and then services are designed to match their needs and desires (Kotler, 1983a).

Implementation of a plan

As a starting point, a weekend seminar needs to be organized for all Occupational Therapists in Malta by the professional body of Occupational Therapists.

The aims of this seminar will include:

1. To highlight the problem of lack of recognition or awareness of what Occupational Therapy is by the public and other health care professionals.
2. Explain the importance of a mission statement and aim at establishing one for Occupational Therapy to encompass all areas of practice in Malta.
3. Brainstorm different marketing strategies that can be employed.
4. Formulate different groups to focus on specific themes or areas.
5. Brainstorm & formulate a plan for funding.
6. SWOT Analysis i.e. strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

The outcome of the seminar is to leave with a campaign which can be worked on within specific groups. Five teams could be organized where the first four teams make up the promotional mix i.e. advertising, promotion, public relations, personal selling and fund raising.

The explanations and lists given below for each area are just some ideas which can be applied to the Maltese situation and are not meant to be comprehensive or conclusive.

Advertising aims at attracting the attention of the consumer and creating interest to stimulate the continued use of the product. Effective advertising can be achieved if a competitive message is targeted to the right people and often enough to have an impact on the target audience.

Timing is also very important, so campaigns are mounted when the target audience are in the mood to try the product.

The following advertising methods may be successful in the local Maltese situation:

1. Brochures / Fliers on occupational therapy aims and objectives.
2. Leaflets for patients on a variety of conditions
3. Posters in departments or central places in the hospital or community centre.
4. Web page on computer.
5. Advertisements in the local newspaper/ magazines/ professional magazines & journals.
6. Television broadcasts/radio slots.
7. Short video that can be used for the press or other events.
8. An audio cassette

Promotion is most effective when used in conjunction with advertising. It consists of providing a number of short-term incentives to purchase the service. Methods such as bonuses coupons are inappropriate to Occupational Therapy since we are mainly dealing with a free health service where we wish to increase awareness. Contests and sponsorships may be an effective way to promote Occupational Therapy with either cash, travel or book prizes or bursaries.

Public relations means attracting the public's attention. An important aspect of publicity is that it is free and objective and has more credibility. Jacobs (1987) suggests that a key to success requires a well-executed media relations programme. This involves becoming acquainted with the media, establishing a rapport, being accessible and responsible and easy to work with. Public relations methods suitable for Occupational

Therapy can include:-

1. Writing in local editorials.
2. Writing articles for newspapers and magazines (e.g. a series on hints and advice for different groups of illness).
3. Involvement in television documentaries and discussion programs.

4. Participation in radio programs.
5. Publicity in the form of press releases/news following events such as: conference, study mornings and participation in a fair;
6. Holding open days.
7. Compilation and production of slides, photos and library resources.
8. Sending wall charts and visiting schools.

Personal Selling involves personal communication. Possibilities in this area suit occupational therapists and include:-

1. Talks at University/college/student guest lectures.
2. Participation in Health fairs and exhibitions.
3. Serving on boards or committees with other health professionals.
4. Participating in continuing education programs with other health care professionals.
5. Organizing study mornings, conferences and seminars.
6. Organizing a publicity week e.g. occupational therapy week or fair.

Fund raising can include:-

1. Organizing a lottery/raffle.
2. Organizing a fund raising dinner.
3. Seeking out sponsors from major suppliers of equipment for leaflets/exhibition stands/brochures/ study days etc.
4. Revenue from selling diaries, pens, notebooks, T-shirts and sweatshirts following competitions.
5. Organizing a cake/jumble/car boot sale.
6. Payment for study days/ entrance to fairs.

The success of the fund raising schemes and the amount of money generated will effect the whole marketing campaign. Each of the other teams will be given a budget or materials to utilise during the various campaigns.

Conclusion

The campaign needs to be monitored at various stages. Reports from each team can be sent to central body for analysis. The impact of the campaigns on the image and awareness of occupational therapy need to be followed through a follow-up survey and an evaluation seminar after approximately six months. Occupational therapy offers promise of an improved quality of life for our clients especially those with chronic diseases and disabilities. It also makes a valid intellectual contribution to the university. Although marketing is a relatively new sphere within health care it can provide professions with strategies to increase recognition and methods to improve their overall image. An effectively designed marketing campaign will ensure that occupational therapy achieves its proper place in the eyes our patients, educational arena, the work sphere and amongst other health care practitioners.

References

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