Mercy Health System's Rebranding Efforts Come to Life on the Web

by Ben Dillon

The greater Philadelphia and Delaware Valley area is one of the country's most competitive healthcare markets. There are dozens of acute care hospitals and hundreds of ambulatory and practice sites. Mercy Health System, the largest Catholic healthcare system in the area, competes with half a dozen community hospitals and is in the shadow of powerful academic medical centers. Although the health system has had a long-standing history in the area, it was struggling with both its brand identity and connecting to consumers through digital platforms.

In January 2011, Mercy's CEO reached out to long-time healthcare marketing consultant Gabrielle DeTora to develop a branding campaign to cut through the over-saturated "noise" in the market and launch a website that attracts new patients.

DeTora, now the interim chief marketing officer at Mercy Health System, implemented a strategic brand marketing campaign aimed at improving awareness of the health system and its core service lines. Her rebranding efforts culminated in the launch of an award-winning new Web presence for Mercy Health System, which was the focus of a recent presentation at a healthcare Internet conference.

Research feeds the rebrand

DeTora began with a three-month brand discovery process and strategic analysis of Mercy Health System's brand. She reviewed quantitative research, led consumer focus groups, interviewed executives, and conducted a competitive marketing audit and positioning analysis. The most useful information came from the focus groups.

"You can't imagine how much you can learn by listening to your target audiences talk about your organization," says DeTora. "We were able to identify our key attributes and also how the audiences define each attribute. And surprisingly, their definitions weren't always the same as ours."

By speaking with consumers, Mercy Health System identified the three attributes the organization is known for: its top doctors, state-of-the-art technology, and advanced medicine.

Surprisingly, though, consumers defined top doctors not as those who are the best in their field, but the doctors who take time to talk and comfort them.

Physicians also played an important role in DeTora's research. With stronger strategic partnerships and physician alignment as primary concerns, Mercy Health System needed to understand what physicians thought of the system. To find out, it held two physician focus groups. One focus group was made up of "splitters," those physicians who send cases to Mercy Health System facilities and other area hospitals. The other group constituted physicians who never send cases to Mercy Health System.

"Listening to the physicians, particularly the ones who don't send cases to your organization, can be eye-opening," says DeTora. "Their input led to the implementation of a new physician alignment strategy and new job descriptions for physician liaisons."

The insights gained from the research fed a complete rebranding effort for Mercy Health System.
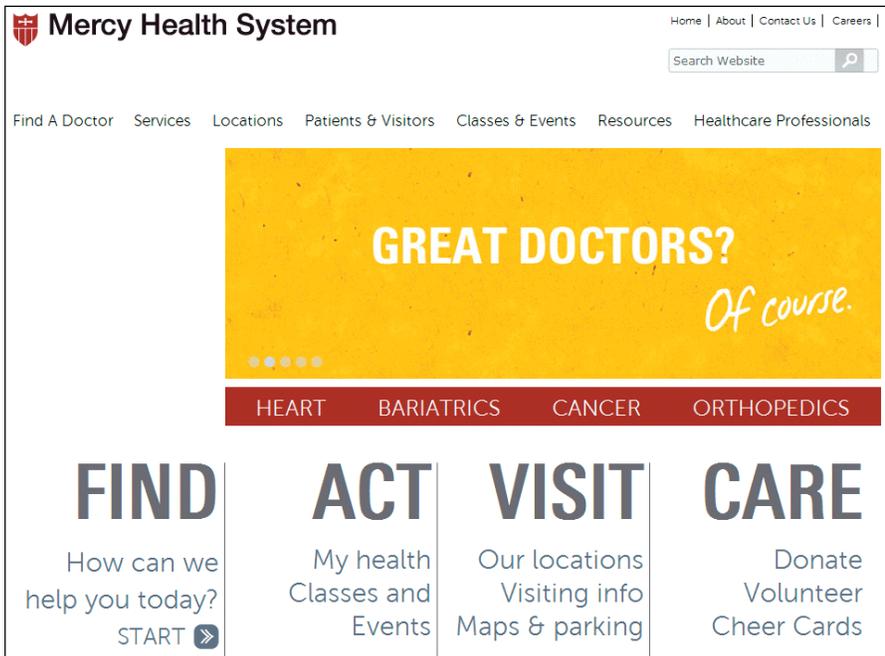
The home page of Mercy Health System's new website

Mobile site

"We recognized the need to create an overarching brand campaign, with more focus on the health system, and to change our tone to align with how our target audiences talk about us. We also identified key service lines poised for growth and analyzed our internal resources in those growing service areas," says DeTora. "We selected four service lines to focus on – heart, bariatrics, cancer, and orthopedics – because they support our bottom line and help fulfill our mission."

Mercy Health System worked with an advertising agency to produce brand materials that promote the key attributes and a campaign using the tagline, "You deserve more." The integrated campaign included traditional television, print, direct mail, and events, as well as digital banners, social media, and pay-per-click search marketing.

"It's hard for Mercy to stand out in a crowded healthcare market," says DeTora. "So we sought to update the brand to feel less like a healthcare organization, adopting a hipper, more engaging voice that

you'd generally associate with a consumer products brand."

This new brand style scored extremely high with the system's target audiences in both qualitative and quantitative research in testing the campaign.

In comes the Web
With the new brand defined, Mercy and its Web partner, Geonetric, began development of a new online presence.

Mercy Health System maintained a number of websites to promote its many facilities. The branding strategy for the system's new site focused on consolidating all of the websites into one site with intuitive navigation. The main site, at www.mercyhealth.org, allows Mercy Health System to balance the strength of the health system brand with the individual hospital brands.

"The old structure worked well if you happened to start at the right point, and if the facility you were researching offered everything you needed," DeTora recalls. "But it was

easy to start at the wrong place, and it was impossible to find services at another facility. We had leakage from the system simply because consumers couldn't find the services they were looking for!"

The new site prominently displays the four key service lines – heart, bariatrics, cancer, and orthopedics. The site also offers a single directory of services, and each service listed guides visitors to the facility where the service is available.

The new design coordinates with the new brand materials. The rotating banner reminds visitors of Mercy Health System's strengths: State-of-the-art technology? Absolutely! Dedicated specialists? No doubt! Great doctors? Of course! The home page navigation – Find, Act, Visit, and Care – encourages visitors to take the next step with Mercy Health System.

DeTora also worked with Geonetric to create a dedicated mobile version of the health system site. "Having a robust mobile platform is essential to our communications strategy," she says. "With Geonetric's help, we created a mobile site with priority functions such as a physician directory."

Mercy Health System launched all of the new brand materials at one time, creating a consistent online and offline experience for its target audiences.

"The Web brought our rebranding efforts to life," says DeTora.

Using the Web strategically

DeTora points out that metrics are important to success. "It's easy to get lost in pretty pictures, but the key to using the Web successfully is to never underestimate its importance as a trackable point in the patient's pathway."

DeTora identified a number of key performance indicators (KPIs) to track the success of the health system's rebranding efforts and keep a watchful eye on conversion points. For example, with the goal of improving brand visibility, DeTora set a KPI of increasing website traffic by 20 percent.

"It's important to identify operational metrics before the campaign launches and track them through the process," says DeTora. "That way we can react and adapt quickly to ensure that the KPIs are accomplished."

DeTora shares metrics through dashboards with her executive team every quarter. Built around the key services, the dashboards allow her to track marketing activities back to volume goals.

"Our initial goals were aggressive based on where the site was before we began this process," says DeTora. "But the peer benchmark data that Geonetric provides tells us that we should be far more aggressive as we set our goals for the next year."

Launch is not the end

Mercy Health System's rebranding efforts officially launched with the new website in March 2012. DeTora meets quarterly with Geonetric to review site metrics and make adjustments. Her team also creates monthly checklists to ensure the site continually evolves.

"Unveiling a new brand and launching a new website is not the end," cautions DeTora. "You need to establish checkpoints to ensure you meet your goals, and up the ante on your efforts. You're continually re-evaluating."

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