

Striving for excellence: investigating the practical aspects of dietetic practice

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Abstract

Dietetics is a constantly evolving scientific field, and challenges for the dietitian are not restricted to private practice, but rather span across all sectors of the profession, and are an opportunity for personal and professional growth. The need for evidence-based care and sound scientific information in the context of the vast entity of the Internet and social media are indeed daunting in terms of both challenges and opportunities. Developing the appropriate marketing and business skills can be beneficial during the journey of lifelong learning and in the process of becoming a health professional who is known for excellent service delivery and professionalism.

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Introduction

The profession of dietetics is an evolving field,^{1,2} and never before has the importance of making the voice of the dietitian heard been as important as it is today. An abundance of scientific and non-scientific medical and nutritional information is available to the public in terms of social media, the Internet and lay publications. Healthcare professionals have a substantial challenge to ensure that evidence-based care is promoted as the authority in health care and treatment.

Although the need for marketing and business skills in health care has been widely publicised, there is limited available training in this regard, and there is a need for practical guidance as part of the lifelong learning process. Words such as “branding”, “marketing”, “team work” and “leadership” are used freely, but remain ill-defined with respect to their implementation.

Defining professionalism

The role of the dietitian has evolved over the years, not only in its clinical aspects, but also with regard to the skills necessary for marketing, business acumen, product development and policy-making.^{1,2} As a result, responsibility and self-management are required in the self-employment environment. The available literature suggest that unsatisfactory performance in health care is more likely to be owing to unprofessional behaviour, rather than knowledge and skills.³ It is well accepted that professionalism is the key to career success and results from a lifelong commitment to excellence.⁴

In an effort to assess professionalism in the healthcare profession, the literature has been organised into five clusters:

- Adherence to ethical practice principles.
- Effective interaction with patients and people important to patients.
- Effective interaction with people working within the healthcare system.
- Reliability and commitment to autonomous maintenance.
- Continuous improvement in competence.⁵

Professionalism in the medical field has been defined as “the extended set of responsibilities that include a respectful, sensitive focus on individual patient needs which transcends the physician’s self-interest, understanding and use of the cultural dimension in clinical care, the support of colleagues, and sustained commitment to the broader, societal goals of medicine as a profession”.³

Marketing

Marketing is the sum of all of the work placed into understanding how people value a given service, how their needs can best be met, and to achieve recognition for expertise and quality service offered in an endeavour to address patients’ needs and to improve their quality of life.

The basics of marketing have been summarised into the four “Ps” of product, positioning, price and promotion (Table I). The product is the service rendered in the working environment in dietetics, and includes the whole of the patient’s experience, including that of the professionals who refer the client. The concept of positioning is

much larger than mere geographical location, and refers to a niche in practice and the given working environment. Price is determined by the schedule of funders, or by what a dietitian charges for services rendered. Promotion refers to how the public is informed of a given product. Against this background, marketing is a process of thinking, researching and planning. This is what separates it from advertising.

Table I: The four “Ps” of marketing⁶

Product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service provided to referring colleagues and patients • It includes the entire customer experience
Positioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical location • Positioning relative to competitors • How niche markets are targeted
Price	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medical aid tariffs • Private tariffs
Promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the public is informed of the service • How the service is matched to the needs of the public

Therefore, dietitians have to work hard in order to achieve recognition and to increase demand for specialised services that are available to patients.⁴ Other than scientific and academic capabilities, dietitians also have to exude leadership, confidence and enthusiasm, as well as effective communication skills which result in a message a message of trust being imparted within the first few minutes of meeting a client face to face.⁴

Private practising dietitians need to promote themselves to the public as a source of reliable, scientific information, and thus marketing is essential to advancement of the dietetics profession.⁶⁻⁸ It is imperative for private practising dietitians to have a marketing strategy, and to be aware of the relevant marketing principles and communication elements, such as direct marketing, public relations, advertising, and the use of new technologies. Although most dietitians agree that marketing is important, their marketing skills have been reported to be variable.⁹

Social media

It was shown in a study on patients and professionals’ motives for using social media that patients used social media for information and support, whereas health professionals predominantly used it to connect and network with colleagues.⁹

The term “social media” has been defined as “forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content, such as videos”. Social media has had a major impact on daily life worldwide. It is broadly used, and reports indicate that over one billion subscribers on facebook, LinkedIn and twitter share personal life events and thoughts, as well as use the medium of social media as a marketing aid.¹⁰

The legal risks of social media (Table II) imply that rules of conduct should address the interaction between organisations and the public, but that among colleagues as well. In 2012, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (ADA) warned that “social media should be approached with the same professionalism as any other interpersonal, profes-

sional-to-client or professional-to-professional meeting”.¹¹ There is a need for an equivalent position statement or guidelines for dietitians in the South African setting.

Table II: The suggested “do’s” and “don’ts” of social media^{10,12}

Here is a general checklist of the “do’s” and “don’ts” of social media:

- Select applications that fit your message, online style and content
- Do not mix your personal and online presence
- State clearly whether or not the messaging is your own, or that of your employer or organisation
- Maintain patient, client, employee and employer confidentiality
- Check your online presence, as well as security settings regularly, to ensure that you are reaching the appropriate audience
- Disclose any material connections
- Maintain digital competence. New technologies require skills
- Maintain credibility, but remain honest, i.e. when making mistakes
- Share your successes and lessons learned with colleagues

The risk of blurred lines in patient-professional relationships is high in a culture where reputation is based on a given number of “followers”. Dietitians are advised to first consider their professional roles and responsibilities before “befriending” patients on social media websites. The Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society has published a white paper on social media entitled *Healthcare friending*, which advises health professionals to adopt clear goals on participation and the selection of social media for a professional online presence. It is critical that a clear distinction is made between one’s professional and one’s online presence in order to protect and maintain professional credibility.¹⁰

Social media is associated with a high risk of claims with respect to damage made to another professional’s reputation owing to the ease with which comments are transmitted and received. The speaker is afforded an audience far beyond that of just the injured party, and thus when voicing an opinion, this should be borne in mind. It is important to adopt the recommendation: “If it should not be said in person, then it should not be said on a social media website”.¹¹

A copyright owner must offer consent for his or her original work to be shared or displayed. It is still plagiarism if excerpts or passages are posted in a facebook post without due referencing. Sharing ideas or research in health care is important, but the information shared must be monitored at all times because of the expanded audience. Once the “send” or “post” button has been selected, the practitioner no longer has full control over the message downstream or the interpretation thereof.¹¹

Although there is no shortage of both lay and scientific medical information on the internet, the ADA suggests that all information shared by dietitians should be accompanied by a disclaimer that such information is not a substitute for individual care, and that the application of the information should be carried out at the reader’s own risk. Disclaimers protect against liability lawsuits.¹¹

It is advisable to ensure that privacy settings on personal sites are set so that limited information is available to the public.¹² A study on

the information publicly shared on facebook among young doctors in 2010 revealed that personal information, sexual orientation and photographs were open to the public, a setting which creates questions regarding credibility and places boundaries between patients and health professionals.¹³

Business acumen: plan your work and work your plan

A business plan is a written document that should include marketing and financial and business goals. It is a fluid dynamic document which should be revisited and adapted as a business grows. It should provide a business description, services, marketing analysis and strategy, management and operations, and financial projections.¹⁴

Setting up a business plan can serve the private practitioner in a multitude of ways. While lengthy plans are suitable when attempting to obtain financial aid, a simple and precisely described one-page plan can ensure improved success. A simple and time-bound plan must include a purpose (“Why am I in business?”), vision (“What do I see for the future of my business?”) and mission (“What do I need to do to achieve my vision?”).¹⁴

Setting up a professional website has various advantages. It enhances a company’s image and can create the impression that it is valid and “cutting edge”. It also provides prospective clients with information 24 hours a day. However, in order for a website to be profitable, it has to be up to date and valid. Describe one’s objectives in terms of the type of person one wants to attract and the type of service one wants to impart.¹⁵

Do not be afraid of asking for help. It is important to obtain support from professionals.¹⁵ Web developers, accountants and other consultants have experience to share and can make running a practice less daunting.

Conclusion

Dietetics is a field with ample opportunities. After finding a niche, the challenge for the dietitian in private practice lies in building a skill

set that will enable the delivery of evidence-based care in a way that creates trust among patients and colleagues. In the information age, it is possible for dietitians to market the profession in an exciting way and to advance their personal practice as well as raise the profile of dietitians in general, while educating the public on sound nutrition practices.

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