

## Are urgent care centers brands or commodities?

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by [Andrea J. Simon](#)

As I observe the extraordinary growth of urgent care centers (UCCs), I am seeing some important changes taking place, both in the customer experience and in the range of services offered. These changes are raising important questions for leaders of UCCs, namely, "Are we just 'another outlet' offering fast, convenient care like the ones down the street or at the CVS? Or are we establishing a proprietary brand in the way we deliver care and the range of services we offer?"



Whether you are involved with the launch and growth of a UCC or lead another type of healthcare organization, you should be asking yourself the branding question: "Why you?" Because you better believe your customers are asking it. And with the growing abundance of healthcare options, they're going to be asking it a lot. So what might you do to answer the question: "Why you?"

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### Urgent care centers: In the right place at the right time?

While docs-in-the-box have been around for a long time, a rapid expansion of these care centers has emerged as consumers have had to deal with large deductibles and difficult access points to their doctors--assuming they even have primary care doctors.

We know from research that only 66 percent of men have primary care doctors. Other research reveals that similarly, only 60 percent of millennials have PCPs. The lesson here? UCCs offer better, less expensive alternatives to emergency departments for people who work during the day or have no personal physician.

### Mistake: Branding use only for launch of UCC locations, not as a key part of expansion

UCCs are all fairly similar in their set-up. They all seem to focus on how fast consumers can be seen by a physician or a nurse practitioner, and how easily consumers can then be passed back to their own doctor after their UCC experience.

Choice appears to revolve around convenience, online reviews from users and word of mouth. At my firm, we are working on buyer journey research to fully understand how people actually decide to go to one UCC over another UCC, and how capitalizing on this decision-making process could help UCCs capture and retain their customer base.

But a brand (think Starbucks) is not just something that's convenient or "another." Starbucks certainly is not another--people are downright passionate about its coffee. Dunkin Donuts has perfectly fine coffee, but it is not a Starbucks. See the difference?

So how can UCCs learn from coffee companies to build brands that consumers will choose to go to for reasons other than the fact that they are convenient and fast?

Three things that are critically important to the branding of your healthcare organization:

- » People buy with emotion and justify with reason. How fast you are and which maladies you take care of are important. But often, they're not nearly as important as how the experience feels to the mom with a sick child, a man injured at work, or a teen who is worried that his sore shoulder will keep him from pitching in the big game. Do you have any idea what your customer experience is really like? Have you tried it from the customer's point of view? Unless you see it you really don't know what "it" is. Try it and see what key things are revealed about your business.
- » Determine what the consumer really needs and wants, and then offer that. What will truly differentiate you from the rest? Should you be "faster" or more "comforting and caring"? What is your brand essence: efficient delivery of care or compassionate, personalized service?
- » Walk the walk, don't just talk the talk. If you decide your brand is high tech (fast and efficient) or high touch (caring and kindness), how will you "live the brand"? If the message you're broadcasting is that you are different and the only one delivering care in this way, you need to ensure that every person on your staff lives that brand every day at every touch point. Remember, consumers have an abundance of choice these days, and if they feel your brand promise is only hollow words, they'll quickly un-choose you.

Once you have identified your unique brand promise, you can then take that "only" and, like Starbucks, become the destination that people go out of their way to patronize. You will have become what they need, where and when they need it. Hopefully they'll become as passionate about your unique care delivery as they are about their coffee. Try it and see!

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