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Ad Campaign Helps Define Urgent Care



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A photograph of a man in a striped shirt leaning over a patient in a clinical setting, likely a doctor examining a patient. The image is faded and serves as a background for the article.

BY CARRIE VAUGHAN

What types of emergencies can be treated at an urgent care clinic versus the emergency department (ED)? That is the question that San Antonio-based Texas MedClinic® sought to answer with its educational ad campaign “For Life’s Little Emergencies.”

Urgent care is a relatively new specialty and “many centers, ourselves included, have had a problem with identity,” says **David Gude, MD**, COO of Texas MedClinic, which operates 14 clinics in the San Antonio and Austin area. Historically, many centers

offered urgent care as well as family medicine services, so there was a blurring of the lines, says Gude, who is trained in family medicine and has been practicing for more than 25 years. This occurred because many family physicians looking to build their client list would take walk-ins and urgent care cases as a way to grow their practice, he explains. The number of available walk-in appointments would decline as the client list grew.

Texas MedClinic took a different strategy—it wanted to exclusively focus on urgent care. But 10 years



SIMPLE, BOLD MESSAGES

highlight the types of conditions that people can seek treatment for at Texas MedClinic.

THE BAND-AID IMAGE

built on Texas MedClinic's reputation for occupational medicine with employers. It is known for its distribution of its Band-Aid® dispensers.



ago, it still had people coming to its centers for routine care, such as prescription refills for hypertension. "We weren't always good about getting [those types of patients] with a primary care physician," Gude says.

So about five years ago, Texas MedClinic decided to clearly define its urgent care services. "First we worked with the physicians to define what is urgent care and what does that mean," says Gude.

For example, it doesn't mean treating chronic diseases like hypertension and diabetes. "If we have trouble defining urgent care, imagine how difficult it is for people who are coming to us and don't really know a lot about medicine."

Texas MedClinic focuses exclusively on urgent care and has a solid relationship with local primary care physicians because it refers patients in need of primary care services to those physicians, Gude

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PATIENT EDUCATION

was a key component of Texas MedClinic's ad campaign, so it listed the exact type of urgent care conditions patients could seek treatment for in its print ads.

says. "We are not stealing patients with chronic diseases, and we also identify new patients and refer them back to primary care physicians."

Educating patients

Once Texas MedClinic had a clear definition of its urgent care services, the next step was educating consumers. "We took different types of services that we treat and we tried to make them more visual, so

that patients could associate what a little emergency is rather than a large emergency," says **Gwynn Deaver**, director of marketing for Texas MedClinic. "We did things like 'For life's little sprains' or 'For all of life's little strains, cuts or bruises.'"

Many people with a laceration or strain end up at the ED, because they don't know that they can go to an urgent care center for treatment of those illnesses. "People understood that we treat colds and

allergy and flu, but a lot of people didn't realize that we have x-rays and the capability to suture up lacerations and treat sprained ankles and foreign objects in the eye," Deaver says. The message that Texas MedClinic wanted to communicate with simple advertising was, "Did you know you can come to us for this, and avoid sitting in the ED for 3-4 hours?" she says.

"We recognize that there are some problems where you should go to the ED—chest pains or stroke. If

you come to us, that is where we are going to send you anyway," says Gude. There are certain conditions that primary care physicians are better equipped to manage such as chronic illnesses, he adds. But then there is the middle ground, acute conditions such as a sprain, cut, or even an infection like MRSA. "Those problems that have a beginning and end but may need follow-up, we think we can do a better job than the ED in treating," says Gude.

Certainly, the ED can treat an abscess, "but we can do it more cost-effectively and get the patient in and out more quickly," he notes. For those types of conditions, a patient may be treated in the ED, but then need follow-up care with a primary care physician or urgent care center, whereas "we can see that injury through its course and manage it all in one facility in a cost-efficient way not only for the patient but for the insurance company as well," he says.

For example, an abscess is a procedure with a global fee, paid one time. If a patient comes back three to four times for routine care of that illness, there are no more bills that go out to anybody, explains Gude. But if they start out in the ED, there is the ED bill and then the bill for follow-up visits with the primary care physician.

Getting the message heard

Texas MedClinic opted to use a Band-Aid® image in its advertising, for two key reasons—it built on its existing reputation and conveyed

the advertising message effectively. Aside from urgent care, Texas MedClinic also offers occupational medicine services, and as part of those services it provides Band-Aid dispensers for employers, says Deaver. "We noticed that employers associate us with the Band-Aid dispensers that we provide them and thought we could tie the two things together," she says.

Many of those employers also use the centers for urgent care, so it was a great way to connect with urgent care patients and build on that brand concept for Texas MedClinic, she says.

The advertising campaign, which launched in 2010, includes print, billboard, and direct mail. It also focuses on social media, says Deaver. "Over the past year, we have done a lot of social media. We have a Facebook page, Twitter account, and an e-newsletter that we send out." On the Facebook and Twitter accounts, the organization posts articles about urgent care on topics such as, "How do you know where to go for urgent care" and "Why urgent care centers are cost-effective."

In addition to the more traditional media elements, the organization also launched an internal marketing and educational tool earlier this year. Rather than having blank monitors in exam rooms, the information technology staff worked with the marketing department to build a two-minute screen saver that educates and informs patients

LOOKING CLOSER



LOCATION

Based in San Antonio, TX

SIZE

14 urgent care centers

WEBSITE

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MARKETING CONTACT

Gwynn Deaver,
director of marketing

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now using the screen saver and capitalizing on the time when a patient is a captive audience sitting in the exam room to inform them about services and why they may not need an antibiotic or medicine for certain illnesses," says Gude.

The campaign's message is already yielding positive results. For example, at health fairs "we are starting to hear people say, 'I came in the other day because my son twisted his knee' instead of 'I came to see you because of a cold,' says Deaver. The organization also determined by asking new patients "How did you hear about us" that its direct mail piece has been its most effective way to drive new patients to its centers. Texas MedClinic continues to see demands for its clinics grow and has plans to open five or six new centers in its Austin market in the next five years, says Deaver.

But that doesn't mean its educational ad campaign will end anytime soon. If you go to different cities, there are still different definitions for urgent care, says Gude, adding that the emergence of freestanding EDs in the region will only further complicate matters. "There are [urgent care] centers in other areas that operate more like an ED—using ED codes, charging ED prices, and monitoring patients for 6–7 hours," he says. "The industry is still very fractured and there is not a lot of consistency as to what urgent care is." *hna*

ED ALTERNATIVE

Texas MedClinic highlights that patients can save time and money for small emergencies by choosing urgent care versus the ED.

about services, says Gude. Currently, it educates patients on two of the organization's strategic priorities: an effort not to overprescribe antibiotics, especially for viral cold and flu

illnesses, and a campaign to educate patients about treatment for back pain and injuries.

"There is a lot of misinformation for back injuries and pain, so we are