For many years the Association for Dietetics in South Africa has used the slogan: “If it’s about nutrition, ask your Dietitian”. Is this however the case, that both the public and our colleagues consider us the first point of reference when it comes to nutrition information? To ensure that it is, it is our responsibility to make our professional services known. Making professional services known is unfortunately a foreign concept to many dietitians.

The health care sector of the economy is fast changing and competitive forces are playing an ever increasing role. Patients are becoming more informed, more empowered and are more involved in making their own healthcare choices. At the same time, the healthcare sector is changing on a daily basis, and especially private practicing dietitians will find that medical scheme rules regarding services rendered become stricter. For this reason it has become imperative for dietitians and clinicians to be able to promote or market the health care service they offer to ensure financial survival. Dietitians typically have received very little formal training in the field of marketing, which results in our limited understanding and passion for marketing challenges faced with today. Marketing concepts such as “service quality zone of tolerance, levels of consumer satisfaction, branding of services, patient participation” etc. should become part of our training, part of our vocabulary, and part of our business. 1, 2

The concept of health care marketing is seen as a relatively new but complex development. The stake holders or decision makers in health care include the patients, medical schemes, and employers. The critical components to consider when embarking on a marketing campaign include product, price, place, promotion and partners.3 So what is this product we are offering – nutritional health care? It can be simplified as SERVICE. Due to our current economic environment, health care providers are constantly seeking to improve product and service. It is important for each private practicing dietitian to define his/ her product or service to the patient and to be able to market it effectively. This allows us to secure our place in the nutrition market as leaders end scientific experts, promote our practice and profession, set our price, and sell our “product”.4

The article published in this edition of the SAJCN, used a descriptive cross-sectional survey, to demonstrate the perceptions of South African dietitians in private practice on the relevance of health care specific marketing and communication elements. Even though the sample was small (N=79), an interesting trend of thought can be seen in this convenience sample. The author emphasizes that private practicing dietitians are faced with the challenge of introducing themselves to the public as a source of good and sound scientific nutrition information. She states that marketing is essential to promote the profession of dietetics, but also to promote private practices, as dietitian are only one in a pool of many claiming to give sound nutrition information to the public. The author also brings to our attention the legislative aspect of marketing healthcare services in South Africa, which is regulated by the HPCSA. She states it is imperative for private practicing dietitians to have a marketing strategy, and be aware of relevant marketing principals and communication elements such as direct marketing, public relations, advertising, and the use of new technology. Out of the survey performed, it is clear that all participants of the survey was not equally marketing orientated. It seemed personal marketing was deemed a very relevant option of marketing, where as advertising, new technology (website/ cellular/ sms), sponsorship and new media marketing was not as popular. The structured approach of a flow diagram is a systematic way for clinicians to put their marketing thinking cap on. Her four steps of practical recommendations to marketing seem very logical and easy to implement. Constants that need to be taken into account before attempting a marketing campaign, is financial resources, legislation, training and the clinician’s personality.

The literature is very limited on marketing strategies in health care management. This could explain why South African dietitians are also not yet geared to effectively market themselves and the profession of dietetics.

The question might now arise: Can branding of health care services ensure a higher quality of service? Snihurowych *et al*., states that branding of services could have numerous benefits for the health care industry, to improve technical and service quality. This could be achieved due to transparent patient choices, improved communication by the health care worker, reduced costs and appropriateness of care – directly resulting in patient satisfaction due to branding.5 Lofgren *et al*., focuses our attention on the fact that the most elusive challenge faced with in health care marketing, is to find an effective strategy to substantially differentiate our profession or the private practice in the community, and then drive a profitable business. This article shows that focusing on firstly improving the health care service to the patient, the clinicians and the other employees, can provide the necessary excitement and energy of a marketing strategy that can lead to increased market share and financial profit.6

It is clear that marketing of the dietetic profession, and dietetic private practices offer unique challenges. It is also clear that the concept of marketing ourselves and our profession challenges most of us to move outside our comfort zone. It would be the ideal to include marketing strategies and business management as part of the standard training of dietitians. Research on marketing strategies and the effect of ongoing marketing in a health care setting will be crucial to promoting the profession of the dietetics and dietitians as the experts in the ever changing field of scientific nutrition information.

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