



Choosing an Outreach Product

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Laboratory outreach service has become a complex and competitive environment with the advent of more sophisticated technology, web-based services, and increasing demands from physician office clients for integrated and seamless functionality. In order for hospital based businesses to build, remain fluent, or gain new territory, they must mature their techniques to include the current/future technology and strategize how best to remain a player in this field.

What does lab outreach cover?

Standard laboratory outreach services took the following scope in the past:

Typical hospital based lab outreach consisted of supplying physician offices with test order requisitions that were completed, a courier then picked up the specimens, those specimens were taken to the lab location, tested, then the results were printed and sent with the next courier or faxed to the office. Billing was done through hospital or 3rd party billing systems.

Today, this approach is not meeting the needs of either the service provider (laboratory) or the customer (physician office). Fast paced environments in both locations put this type of service in the slow lane. Physician offices need less tedious forms of ordering, viewing, inquiring, and incorporating the lab results into their existing environment. Competition for the outreach testing activities is highly charged due to the revenue associated with outpatient testing versus low yield inpatient revenue dollars. Reference laboratories are marketing integrated systems to the physician office environment that match seamlessly with existing office electronic medical record systems (EHR), making the effort to the office staff and physician as minimal as possible.

There are, however, some advantages the hospital based businesses have or may take advantage of, to compete with national, regional, or local reference laboratories. Many physician offices are associated with the hospital based laboratory that is seeking to acquire outreach business. This association has more than just laboratory results to offer. There are a number of services that might be leveraged in the lab outreach market such as past results of lab tests, radiology results, AP results, medical history including inpatient visits of the patients being seen at the office, to name a few. These are items to which the un-associated reference labs may not have access to offer to the customer. Moreover, the associated health system may have specific patient population types of information and reference data (such as pediatrics) that the physician is accustomed to seeing on an inpatient basis and this may also provide incentive for dealing with the same entity for outreach work.

What do you need to compete?

Marketing the laboratory as an outreach provider will require several incentives to attract the customers in the physician office, clinic and possibly nursing home or long-term-care arenas. First and foremost, if the customer currently has an EHR, the laboratory must be able to integrate to this product to allow office staff to remain within the confines of their own system for the majority of their effort to order and view lab tests. There are of course other services to consider, but the main focus for the lab revolves around order and result integration to the EHR suite. In choosing an outreach product, the very 1st consideration should be this functionality. If an office does not currently have an electronic system for tracking patients (many have yet to consider switching from paper), then the next consideration is web-based orders and results. Although EHR's have not hit every physician office location, few locations do not have web access. Using a web-based outreach application allows the most primitive (paper-driven) offices the opportunity to order and view lab results along with many other additional services that the hospital based systems may have available as mentioned.

As systems integrate more fully, interoperability becomes more important. Successful systems must have the capability to function within many environments. There are a large number of EMS solutions from which to choose when physician offices shop for solutions. Outreach systems must be able to deal with nearly all of those solutions to make the office effort as minimal and transparent as possible. And successful software solutions allow for fast updates to add new client EHR's not previously encountered.

The next function to recognize and consider is specimen tracking. With many lab tests requiring special handling, the importance of knowing exactly where a particular specimen is in its' venture from collection to resulting remains of high importance to physician offices. Prospective applications should have qualities that allow for detailed collection/transport lists that contain data elements that may be used to track specimen and or results to a fine level. The application should be simple for the end user to manipulate whether that individual is a physician office clerk or laboratory customer service technician. New systems are being deployed that allow the transport list to be included into a GPS format thus allowing point to point tracking for specimens with estimated ETA's in some instances.

Carrier management is an important consideration in choosing an application especially where labs establish large networks of clients or are considering building larger networks. Applications should be able to maintain inventory of carrier fleets, routes, supplies, maintenance, fuel, labor, and miscellaneous expenses. Robust systems allow for route plotting and cost saving measures around pick-up routes.

Acceptable outreach software application will provide for strong customer service procedures that are user friendly and are able to function rapidly for the lab to handle not only minute by minute calls from clients, but also "back-end" functions of monitoring, periodic reports, revenue, call tracking and many other features.

Finally, billing modules are the crucial measure labs must secure before they "hit the road" to market their services. Without a highly flexible billing program, labs face a disproportionately small share of the revenue of outreach business. Applications must be able to generate pricing schedules for preferred or high volume clients. Labs must be ready to handle all types of payors, not just the well recognized plans. In order to attract business, accepting and billing any plan or patient type is essential and software must accommodate this effort. Applications must allow for discount pricing based upon test profiles that offices prefer to use in high volume and conversely reflect higher prices when specified profiles or individual test are chosen by clients. Application must utilize the most recent advances in bill processing, tracking, and customer service features with active update capabilities being part of the contracted cost for the application.

What should you consider "internally" when shopping for an outreach system?

Consider the long range plans of the laboratory and the healthcare system. Is the lab forecasting increased growth in any sector? Is the healthcare system making major changes in structure, software platforms, business plans or community growth? If the lab is forecasting a change in software platforms, careful consideration of the choices in outreach systems will be essential. In this scenario, an outreach system must be chosen that can be road worthy enough to survive the migration of the lab to another software platform. Limiting choices to outreach applications that reside within the confines of existing lab systems may not make sense in the future if this application must be abandoned when the lab moves to another product.

Determining what the current and future market audience will be for outreach ventures is important to consider as well. Will there be growth of clients in new territories? Will there be a shift in patient populations or payor types within a demographic area? Will clients change their allegiance to healthcare systems or become part of those systems?

Cost of software is of course a major concern. Careful analysis of features, benefits, ROI, stability of application and vendor in the market are items to consider. A detailed comparison by various parties during the selection process is needed to determine operating costs as many systems provide services that vary greatly in their approach to building an outreach platform. Some systems do not require additional hardware of any nature, some require it, and others require that the lab or healthcare systems provide servers to accommodate their applications running resident on existing units. These all break down to different pricing plans and must be carefully evaluated to determine the best fit for the organization.

Is the laboratory considering any expansion of it's' test catalog? Are there new test applications that will attract market businesses? Many times laboratories may only focus upon inpatient types of tests and profiles and not determine if this is the best approach to sell to another audience. Consider what other successful reference laboratories are offering their clients and seek to tailor a test catalog for your outreach audience. It may be that incorporation of new or modified tests will gain business and make sense for labs to adopt where needed.

Quality service and successful business planning are essential items that go hand in hand with selecting outreach systems. Having a sophisticated application without the backend quality and business operation will not be a winning plan.

Lastly, the laboratory and/or the healthcare system may consider the possibility of a joint venture operation to achieve their goals of successful outreach business development. Joining with existing reference labs or local business concerns such as

carrier or customer service organizations may boost the abilities of the laboratory to market their services and allow for the selection of a better outreach solution that might have been out of reach in other circumstances.

If you would like more information please contact VCS at 610.444.1233 or vcs@getvitalized.com.