

Inbound Marketing and Engagement Strategies

Inbound marketing and engagement strategies for critical access hospitals or other rural health care organizations shift the focus from promoting available services to showing the value those services provide. This technical assistance brief explores strategies that attract community members based on their needs and interests. It focuses on digital presence and engagement within the modern patient landscape. The brief also examines how digital engagement, tailored messaging, and audience insights can increase local service utilization and reduce patient outmigration.

Inbound vs. Outbound

Inbound strategies help patients find and engage with the organization, such as publishing a webpage that answers common questions about local services and appears in online searches. These efforts should convert marketing and engagement into action, such as scheduling an appointment, subscribing to emails or commenting on a social media post. Inbound strategies generally follow four stages: attract, convert, close, and delight. Outbound strategies actively reach patients and the community, such as sending a targeted email or postcard about a new clinic or service. These types of strategies are primarily used to inform patients of new or existing services.

Value-Based Messaging

Value-based messaging connects a service to the specific needs, priorities, and concerns of the audience. Rather than only stating what the organization offers, it explains how the service can improve a patient's health, experience, or daily life. For example, instead of promoting "same-day primary care appointments," the organization might say, "Get care close to home when you need it, without waiting days for an appointment or traveling outside the community." This message shows the practical value of the service while addressing convenience, access, and local care.

Attract

The first stage of an effective inbound strategy answers the question, "How do we share who we are and what we do?" This is the foundation of the organization's branding and should be revisited regularly. The answer should attract new community members while reengaging those who already know the organization but may not fully understand its services. Effective attraction strategies include clear messaging, consistent branding, useful website content, social media, community outreach, and other efforts that make the organization easier to recognize, understand, and trust.

Convert

Conversion occurs when someone moves from viewing or engaging with content to taking a specific action. This may include reading about a procedure and scheduling an appointment, downloading a preparation guide, signing up for a health screening, submitting a contact form, or joining an email list. Consistent branding and useful content build trust and



Key Definitions

Inbound Strategies

Guide a targeted audience to take an action with the organization.

Outbound Strategies

Inform a targeted audience of services the organization offers.

Value-Based Messaging

Provides a target audience with information about improving their health or quality of life.



help the audience feel more confident taking the next step. These actions also support data collection and audience insight. Once someone takes one of these steps, they become a “lead.” This means the organization can continue engaging them and guide them from initial interest or scheduling to actual service utilization.

Close

The close phase focuses on helping a lead move from interest to service utilization. After someone schedules an appointment, requests information, or completes a form, the organization can provide appointment reminders, follow-up messages, preparation instructions, insurance guidance, or direct outreach from staff. These actions reduce barriers, build confidence, and increase the likelihood that the individual completes the next step in care.

Delight

The delight phase focuses on maintaining the relationship after a person has received care. Ongoing communication through email, social media, patient education, follow-up surveys, wellness reminders, and community events can reinforce trust and encourage continued use of local services. Engagement tools should provide meaningful value, rather than simply displaying a logo. For example, a diabetes care toolkit with meal-planning resources, medication reminders, and local support information creates a stronger connection than a standard promotional item.

Evaluating Effectiveness

Organizational leadership should assess inbound strategies using clear performance measures. Useful measures include website traffic and referral sources, form completions, appointment requests, email subscriptions, mobile app downloads, notification opt-ins, meaningful social media engagement, attendance at educational events, and changes in patient volume tied to promoted services. A designated review team should meet regularly to examine results, identify trends, and recommend adjustments. Key findings should also be shared with leadership and the board to support informed decision-making. Staff should receive relevant updates so they understand what is working, where improvement is needed, and how their roles support broader engagement goals.

Building Confidence through Quality Initiatives

Health care organizations often share positive quality outcomes to build trust and strengthen their reputation. They are less likely to explain the work that produced those results. Sharing quality improvement efforts helps patients see that care is actively reviewed, measured, and strengthened over time. This can reduce uncertainty and address concerns that contribute to outmigration without disclosing sensitive information. Examples include efforts to reduce medication errors, improve diagnostic screenings, strengthen clinical evaluations, or refine treatment planning. The goal is not simply to promote a result. It is to show patients the value of the work taking place behind the care they receive.

Low-Cost Ways to Build Visibility

Increasing community awareness does not require a large marketing budget. Share patient and staff stories on social media, distribute simple service fliers, and attend local fairs, farmers markets, health events, and community gatherings. Use practical promotional giveaways tied to a service or health need. Consistent messaging, visibility, and follow-through can strengthen awareness and keep local care top of mind.

Strengthening inbound marketing requires a clear strategy, consistent execution, and coordination across the organization. From attraction through ongoing engagement, phases should help the community understand what services are available and the value and quality behind those services. Useful content, tailored messaging, meaningful follow-up, and transparent communication can build trust, reduce uncertainty, and encourage patients to seek care locally. For additional support, contact TASC at TASC@ruralcenter.org.

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