



# Always-on Marketing

Why healthcare organizations  
should take an always-on  
marketing approach

INSIGHT GUIDE

# Table of contents

Introduction	3
Challenges to adopting always-on marketing	4
Making the case for always-on marketing	5
How digital solutions enable always-on marketing	7
Building relationships via digital	8
Conclusion	9

# Introduction

The need for healthcare is inevitable, and most people will need more extensive care multiple times throughout their lives. When the time comes for consumers to search for a provider or seek information about a condition or procedure, healthcare organizations must be ready. That's where always-on marketing comes in.

Always-on healthcare marketing (AKA lifecycle marketing) means there is always some level of activity in-market. This approach prioritizes longevity and consistency, so consumers can find what they need at any stage of their healthcare journey. It's a meticulously planned, continuously operating, year-round approach that moves beyond the traditional campaign model.

"Nobody wants to think about healthcare until they need it. So being there at a consumer's time of need is what an always-on campaign allows to happen," explains Matt Klein, VP Marketing Solutions Consulting for WebMD Ignite.

Alternatively, a start-stop approach that pauses campaigns periodically means some patients will fall into that "off" gap and miss your messaging at the moment they need it most. If you're not top of mind, if you're not actively sharing how you can help your consumers, they will simply go elsewhere — to another website and another provider.

An always-on marketing approach, however, offers a win-win solution.

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***"Always-on is not a big branding campaign or a specific promotion. It is connecting patients with the right care, when they need it, at the most basic level."***

— **Christina Pelosi**, Executive Director,  
Digital Strategy & Analytics,  
WebMD Ignite



## Win #1:

Consumers can find what they need whenever and wherever they need it.

## Win #2:

Always-on allows you to guide those consumers exactly where you want them to go — to your organization and your providers — for top-quality content and care.

# Challenges to adopting always-on marketing

Healthcare organizations are facing sizable challenges and pressures, reaching historical levels of disruption for some. We've identified three main challenges faced by most healthcare organizations and their marketing teams right now.

## Challenge #1: Financial strain

Healthcare organizations are encountering unprecedented financial stresses, including rising costs and a slowing (and uncertain) economic trajectory recovery. Half of U.S. hospitals ended 2022 with a negative margin, according to a report from Kaufman Hall.<sup>1</sup>

One example: An Iroquois Healthcare Association survey found nearly 90% of hospitals in upstate New York reported negative or razor-thin operating margins, setting them up to end the year with millions of dollars in operating losses. Of those hospitals, about 30 sites faced potential losses of at least 2%.<sup>2</sup>

Organization executives are prioritizing cost management above all else. Yet oftentimes this results in pausing marketing efforts periodically, or slashing marketing budgets altogether. But cutting marketing budgets risks even more losses, with missed opportunities to reach new consumers, and allowing them to find your competition.

## Challenge #2: Operational readiness

Labor shortages have impacted every segment of the healthcare industry. The American Hospital Association estimates the industry will face a labor shortage for the next decade, with too few doctors, nurses, technicians, aides, and assistants.<sup>3</sup> What does this mean for healthcare organizations and their patients? Longer hospital stays, for one thing, which further drive up costs.

But patient care always comes first. Marketing teams may have grown smaller and will be expected to do more with less as a result. Resources and full-time employees (FTE's) — especially in departments that are seen as cost centers — may be reduced while output and productivity expectations remain the same. This translates to fewer people and less financial support to do the work of building your brand's awareness and affinity among consumers.

A recent survey of CMOs found significant "capability gaps" in marketing teams, particularly in the areas of marketing data and analytics, customer understanding and experience management, and marketing technology. CMOs recognize these are critical components of a marketing strategy, but 58% of those surveyed said their teams lacked the capabilities needed to execute their strategy.<sup>4</sup>

### Challenge #3: Transformative transactions

In 2022, there were 53 hospital and healthcare system merger and acquisition (M&A) announcements, with 17 in Q4 alone.<sup>8</sup> With this increased (and what's beginning to feel like a "new-normal") emphasis on consolidation, execs are struggling to determine how (and where) to budget. This becomes a clear and present challenge, especially when focused on predicting and planning for the quarters ahead.

This uncertainty leaves healthcare marketers questioning where they should spend their next dollar. It can be difficult to budget – or make a large advertising commitment – when new partnerships or M&A activity may be knocking at the door.

## Making the case for always-on marketing

Accessing care is a journey, and, at times, a complex one. It is important that providers are top of mind as customers are researching their conditions, exploring their options, accessing care, and recovering. At every turn, customers have a choice, and marketers need to stay focused on the entire journey.

Always-on marketing allows your organization to be consistently present and provide value to consumers at every step. Every stage of the journey represents an opportunity to reach consumers. Keeping your marketing always on makes this far easier. And doing so translates to a steady flow of patients, too. Clients who paused or stopped paid search activity experienced a composite 3% reduction in volume. But remaining visible and always on favorably impacts total visits by 2% to 4%.<sup>5</sup>

Sure, there are challenges, but the only drawback to always-on marketing is not doing it.

When it comes to patient attention and acquisition, competition is fierce. Healthcare organizations must remember that at every turn along their healthcare journey, customers have options and make choices. In fact, about 80% of customers report they'd switch providers for "convenience factors" alone.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, we know both older and younger consumers are accessing care in virtual, retail, and alternative provider settings more than ever before. So if you're "off" while your competitors are "on," consumers will look to them to find what they need, at their time of need.

Keeping your marketing **always on** translates to a steady flow of patients



**2-4%** increase in  
total visits

For clients remaining visible  
and always on<sup>5</sup>

**3%** reduction  
in volume

For clients who paused or  
stopped paid search activity<sup>5</sup>

Another thing to consider is the ramp-up process (and added cost) involved when you pause a campaign. Doing so causes a reset of the algorithms, performance data, and user behavior that was generated while you were in play. Even if you're "off" for only a few weeks, these optimizations need to be relearned. It can take weeks (even months!) to achieve the same level of metrics you were achieving previously. And if there were any shifts in market during this time – keyword activity, trends, increased bidding by the competition – you will need to spend more to get reestablished. The (campaign's) efficiency can drop by 10% to 200%, which translates to a much higher CPL than you were paying previously.

A campaign's efficiency can drop by **10% to 200%** even if they are "off" for only a few weeks.

## Meet Crestner Health



Hypothetically speaking, Crestner Health is a healthcare system serving the healthcare needs of residents and visitors in and around Denver, Colorado. They recently recruited Dr. White, a top-ranking orthopedic surgeon. After only a few weeks, he's ramping up nicely. Now with a 12-week backlog of appointments and scheduled

surgeries, Crestner Health's marketing team decides to pause their joint pain campaign that they've been running consistently for the past 18 months.

Fast forward two months from now. Dr. White goes out on medical leave and all appointments – and surgeries – are on pause. The marketing team is encouraged to quickly generate leads. They restart their tried-and-true joint pain campaign but find things are slow to ramp up. They aren't generating the number of leads they were seeing previously, and are now paying a much higher CPL.

So what happened? When Crestner opted to turn off their digital advertising, leads were driven to the competition. And now, upon restart, to displace those competitors, Crestner's marketing team has to outbid them (by paying a higher CPL), or accept a lower ad position (and lower lead return).

"Over time, always-on campaigns become more efficient, which means you can spend less money to get your ads shown in a favorable position, and it keeps the patient funnel full," says Pelosi. Remember, when you turn off or pause advertising, you're not only shutting down today's funnel, but also restricting it for the next three, six, and potentially nine to 12 months.

# How digital solutions enable always-on marketing

## Digital solutions are cost-effective.

At a time when costs are skyrocketing, what could be better than a solution that actually makes money while saving money?

While they aren't yet to pre-pandemic levels, marketing spending is starting to move in the right direction. A 2022 Gartner survey found the average marketing spend increasing from 6.4% to 9.5% of company revenue across almost all industries.<sup>4</sup> And, CMOs are making the shift to boosting their digital spends. Pure-play digital channels account for more than 72% of total marketing budgets.<sup>7</sup> It makes sense to focus budgets online because that's where consumers are.

Digital marketing, when done right, generates a much greater cost-per-acquisition (CPA) – at a far lower rate – than offline advertising. With a number of ways to stay in-market consistently, from social media and email marketing to digital out-of-home (DOOH), there's opportunity. Yet, when faced with a choice, search engine marketing (SEM) is the most cost-effective and efficient way to stay covered between larger marketing programs. Clients in general see between a 2:1 to 8:1 ROI as a result of always-on campaigns.<sup>8</sup>

## Digital solutions are efficient.

The days of “spray-and-pray” marketing are over. The consumer data that's collected, the targeting and risk analysis that develop as a result, and the digital tools and tech used to personalize a consumer experience all weave and work together to create a model that's staggeringly efficient. These digital solutions tell us exactly who to reach — and where and how to reach them.

We can reach our target audiences more precisely and effectively, which translates to more patient acquisition and less waste of time and resources. This is particularly important when considering that marketing teams may have fewer FTEs.

The fact that digital advertising and other messaging modes are cheaper makes them more efficient. You can do more with less — and measure your metrics in real time. Not happy with your current ROI? Digital allows you to pivot and tweak with speed, ease, and precision.



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# Building relationships via digital

Healthcare is intensely personal. Consumers are looking for answers and assurance, comfort and consideration — as well as high-quality care. What consumers want and need most from healthcare organizations:

- **Customer service and quality:** Consumers want to feel comfortable and respected. They want their concerns to be heard, their fears to be addressed, and their questions to be answered.
- **Convenience:** Consumers want to be able to search for providers and information, schedule appointments, and pay their bills with ease — using the methods they prefer.
- **Enablement:** Patients want to be able to do more themselves, from reviewing their charts to scheduling their appointments. They also want their care to be easily accessed and coordinated among their various healthcare providers.
- **Personalization:** Consumers want content and communication that feel like they've been tailored to them and their needs, on their preferred channels.

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*“A sustained always-on campaign offers time-over-time growth. It’s like compound interest. You can’t beat it.”*

— **Matt Klein**, VP, Marketing  
Solutions Consulting,  
WebMD Ignite

These consumer wants and needs, although pretty direct, provide perfect opportunities for always-on marketing. It affords your providers the opportunity to build relationships with consumers that demonstrate you see them, you understand them, and you’re here to help them. By implementing an extended, long-term marketing campaign, you can guide them along every step of the funnel, highlighting your organization’s digital, customer-first capabilities and care.

Customer service  
and quality

Convenience

Enablement

Personalization





# Conclusion

An always-on marketing approach isn't without its obstacles, including budgetary restrictions, a lack of operational readiness, and even a general uncertainty about where to begin.

But you don't have to go it alone.

The right strategic partner can address these issues, plus develop and execute digital marketing solutions that work best for your organization and your customers.

Fit matters when choosing a partner to plan a marketing and brand strategy. The more information you can gather about a potential partner, the better that fit will likely be. Ask these questions when considering an outside agency:

- How familiar are you with the healthcare industry and marketplace?
- What KPIs define success and how do you measure results?
- What results can you guarantee?
- Can you provide client examples with ROI?
- How long have you been working in this space and what's your client retention rate look like?
- What level of creative and technical teams will be dedicated to our account?
- What qualifications, credentials, and ongoing education does your team receive?  
Do they have an understanding about healthcare laws and regulations, e.g., PHI and HIPAA?

In turn, be transparent about the obstacles you are facing. Whether they're financial, operational, or quite frankly just unknown, an outside agency should be able to create a solution that works for you, starting as small (or large) as you need in order to prove value.

Learn how WebMD Ignite can fuel your  
always-on marketing efforts.

Learn more



As the premier growth partner for healthcare organizations, WebMD Ignite empowers decision-making insights across the health journey. By integrating proprietary technology, unrivaled reach, strategic targeting, business intelligence, and educational resources, our solutions solve healthcare industry challenges to boost acquisition, build loyalty, and ignite action.

Learn more at [webmdignite.com](https://webmdignite.com).



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<sup>2</sup> The Journal News. Patients could face service cuts at upstate NY hospitals as costs skyrocket. <https://www.lohud.com/story/news/health/2022/09/26/service-cuts-possible-at-upstate-ny-hospitals-as-costs-climb/69511876007/>

<sup>3</sup> American Hospital Association. Fact Sheet: Strengthening the Health Care Workforce. <https://www.aha.org/fact-sheets/2021-05-26-fact-sheet-strengthening-health-care-workforce>

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<sup>5</sup> WebMD Internal Data

<sup>6</sup> NRC Health. Are these three patient-loyalty myths holding your organization back? <https://nrchealth.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Loyalty-White-Paper.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Gartner. The State of Marketing Budgets 2021. [https://emtemp.gcom.cloud/ngw/globalassets/en/marketing/documents/gartners\\_annual\\_cmo\\_spend\\_survey\\_2021\\_ebook.pdf](https://emtemp.gcom.cloud/ngw/globalassets/en/marketing/documents/gartners_annual_cmo_spend_survey_2021_ebook.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> WebMD Internal Data