

GATEKEEPERS: THEIR VIEWS ON  
COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CENTERS

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The marketing of health services has gained significant attention in recent years. New organizations and new journals have emerged to productively channel the growing body of information in this field. One interesting segment of this field is the marketing of mental health centers.

Introduction

The obvious market for mental health care centers is people with mental health problems, but what is the potential size of this market. National research has shown that fully 20% of the adult population in the United States is troubled at any given time (Time, 1984). Further, between 29% and 38% of the adult population will experience at least one psychiatric problem in their lifetimes (Ahmed, 1984). Clearly, a substantial market for mental health care services exist.

What is particularly alarming about the statistics is that while a significant number of people suffer from mental health problems, only a small percentage of those people afflicted actually receive treatment. The logical question to be asked from a marketing perspective is "Why?" One answer is that while a large number of people do have mental health problems, many people do not have problems which are severe enough to require professional treatment.

Given that not all mental health problems will require treatment, what about those individuals who do require help. Two logical scenarios exist: (1) The individual recognizes that a problem exists and seeks help for it, or (2) The individual does not recognize the problem, but is referred or forced to seek help by another individual or agency. The first scenario, while important, is not directly related to the focus of the present study. The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of those individuals who would commonly be viewed as the referral agents who influence individuals with problems to seek help at a mental health center. As potential gatekeepers to mental health client referrals, the attitudes and opinions towards mental health centers by referral agents can be an important part of the marketing effort by such centers.

One logical approach to successfully market a mental health center would be to target the referral agents. These referral agents might be reasonably viewed as the gatekeepers to success. Literature does exist to support this assertion. For example, a 1984 study concluded that most people sought help from medical doctors rather than from mental health specialists. Two studies in 1980 and 1981 concluded that gatekeepers do exist and they can be divided into several categories with varying degrees of influence (Kohler, 1983). One interesting aspect of the study was to determine what effect, if

any, the mental health propaganda which was prevalent during the 1960 to 1970 era had on the referral agents. It was hypothesized that younger referral agents would have more favorable attitudes toward mental health attitudes than would older referral agents.

Methodology

Four subsamples were selected to represent what was considered to be potential referral agents for mental health center clients. The four subsamples included: (1) local clergy members, (2) local high school counselors, (3) local physicians, and (4) local business people. A fifth subsample was designed to act as a control sample against the first four subsamples. The fifth subsample consisted of a random sample taken from the general population in the selected market area.

The questionnaire was partitioned into four major sections. The first section was designed to obtain scaled information about the sample's attitudes toward the term "mental health" and other general mental health issues. The second section of the questionnaire was designed to gather data about who the respondents would contact if they had a mental health problem, and how important they felt it would be for an individual to seek help if he or she had a mental health concern in seven possible problem areas. The third section specifically asked the respondent to rate the mental health care service provided by four local mental health care delivery agents in the market area. The questions were designed to make direct comparisons between the agencies on 18 important health care service dimensions. The final section consisted of demographic/sociographic variables which were believed to be important for cross-referencing with selected attitude patterns which might emerge.

References

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