

Realizing Your Marketing Influence, Part 3

Professional Certification as a Marketing Tool

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This is the last in a series of articles guiding nursing administrators from broad marketing strategy to tactics and specific applications. The first article laid the foundation for developing a market-driven strategic plan. The second focused on marketing from the inside out. This final article explores the benefits of specialty nurse certification as a strategy for nursing administrators to retain and recruit the most qualified nurses and to differentiate their services from those of competitors. The article includes findings from the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses' proprietary research, suggestions on how to support certification, and a case study of one hospital's experience in conducting a CCRN certification drive as part of their critical care nurse competency program.

Where do the paths of marketing and specialty certification intersect? Why is supporting nurse certification and its underpinnings more important today than ever? How can certification occupy a significant position in a nursing administrator's marketing toolbox?

Marketing, in its most basic sense, is "meeting needs profitably."¹ In a highly competitive industry like healthcare delivery, just meeting customer needs isn't enough. An organization must meet those needs differently or better than its rivals. To achieve this requires securing and sustaining a competitive advantage, even when it seems impossible in such a turbulent industry. But increased environmental turbulence also brings a greater rate of change. This stimulates greater differences in competitors' resources and capabilities, and ultimately

leads to a greater dispersion of profitability in the industry.² Making the right strategic decisions during a turbulent time can lead to sustainable market leadership.

Nursing care is the primary service of a healthcare system, so it makes sense that developing this resource will be a key factor in a healthcare system emerging as, or remaining, the market leader. With a worsening nurse shortage that will continue to dominate the landscape for nursing administrators, this is more important than ever. When taking stock of marketing's traditional 4 Ps—product, place, price, and promotion—it is essential to evaluate and invest in improving your product. Promoting a product that is not optimally developed can be a fatal mistake. A critical success factor in optimizing your product is ensuring that your most valuable resources—nurses—are performing optimally and are retained. How does one retain this scarce resource in the current environment where hospitals ruthlessly poach their competitors' nurses?

The Service-profit Chain model, introduced in 1994, asserts that employee satisfaction leads to customer loyalty and, ultimately, to larger profits.³ What, then, nurtures the job satisfaction level required to retain highly skilled and experienced nurses? Respect, professional development opportunities, and recognition are among the highest drivers of job satisfaction for nurses.⁴ Certification promotes these key drivers and provides the opportunity to differentiate your institution from the competitors.

Certification represents the whole package of professional development. If a healthcare system is interested in building a corps of professional, experienced, committed nurses, certification can be a great catalyst.

Specialty certification requires considerable practice experience in that specialty, rigorous con-

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tinuing education requirements, and a commitment to excellence. These are precisely the things that make nursing a profession rather than a job. Therefore, certification cannot be viewed in isolation as just passing a test. It represents a continuum of learning and professionalism.

Benefits of Certification

Although certification was developed for many reasons, two have withstood the test of time: to assist and protect the public, and to meet the needs of the key stakeholders.⁵ As with most other professional certifications, there is scant research about nurse certification dedicated to measuring the impact of certification on public protection. It has not been definitively proved or disproved that nurse certification leads to better patient outcomes. This is largely due to the extreme complexity of studying certification as an isolated variable in patient outcomes research. It is difficult enough to isolate nursing care as a factor, let alone differentiate between certified and uncertified nursing practice. A few studies with other primary objectives have been conducted, which have included nurse certification as a demographic variable, allowing some conclusions to be drawn. Many studies evaluating areas of clinical expertise have linked CCRN certification to higher levels of clinical knowledge and skill, as well as more years of clinical experience.^{6,9}

Because certification exams and standards are based on a comprehensive national study of practice, they test a nurse's knowledge base against a set of accepted competencies. For this reason, a commitment to nurse certification by a healthcare system can help to ensure that their practices are consistent with national standards and insulate a facility from becoming myopic. In the case of critical care, the purpose of the comprehensive national study of practice is to determine the essential knowledge and competencies needed to provide a specified high standard of critical care nursing for all patients across all settings. These national studies are usually conducted every 3 to 5 years to assure that the competencies tested on the examination keep pace with the rapid changes in critical care nursing practice.

Considerably more research has been conducted on the second reason for certification: meeting the needs of key stakeholders—in this case, nurses. The research focuses primarily on why nurses do or do not pursue certification and, based on self-reporting, how certification affects their prac-

tice, job satisfaction, and professional development. Although this qualitative data may appear “soft” to some, it has become far more critical in a worsening nursing shortage and cannot be ignored. Whether by employer support for education, improved workplace environments, or certification, healthcare systems that support and recognize nurses are far better positioned to become market leaders than those that do not.

Why Should Nursing Administrators Care About Nurse Certification?

The very reasons certification was initiated—to fulfill key stakeholder needs and to protect the public—tie directly to developing a successful marketing strategy for your healthcare system. Stakeholder needs include those of the nurses you employ, and therefore affect recruitment and retention. The public safety element is directly tied to quality of care and differentiating your services in a highly competitive environment.

Nurse Recruitment and Retention

According to the Service-profit Chain, job satisfaction is a major driver of customer loyalty and its resulting bottom-line benefits.³ Naturally, job satisfaction is a key driver of retention. Retention has never been more critical than it will be in the coming years as the impact of the nursing shortage becomes even more widespread. To avoid the energy- and efficiency-sapping practice of juggling nurse schedules when there are simply not enough nurses to fill the need, healthcare systems must excel at recruiting and retaining highly skilled and experienced professional nurses. This cannot be done with smoke and mirrors. It takes a sustained and sincere organizational commitment to the nurses who care for your customers: patients, families, and physicians. By supporting certification, a healthcare system is making an investment in human capital when that capital is more scarce and crucial than ever.

Recent studies by the American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE)¹⁰ and the Finger Lakes Nursing Workforce Collaborative¹¹ illustrate and advocate the need for employers to better support continued learning and professional growth for their nurses. Specifically, the AONE study points to support for continuing education, tuition, and certification as critical factors in retaining and recruiting nurses. That support includes scheduling flexibility to facilitate class attendance; reimbursement for tuition, continuing education, and certification; and

formal career ladders that recognize and reward these efforts. Employer support for certification and the continuing education required to maintain certification are an effective way to boost nurse loyalty while fostering a culture of professionalism. In Cary's international study of certified nurses, an overwhelming 77% of respondents reported that certification enabled them to experience personal growth and 67% reported that they felt more satisfied as a professional nurse.¹²

In addition to these personal benefits, 65% of the certified nurse respondents indicated that they felt more competent in their skills as professional nurses; 54% felt more accountable; and 53% experienced more confidence in their practice. Although the Cary study measured perceptions, not scientific outcomes, it is significant when examined from the perspective of job satisfaction and retention.¹²

In focus groups of CCRN-certified critical care nurses conducted by the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, nurses cited personal satisfaction as the most important reason for seeking critical care certification. Most of the nurses indicated that they had decided to sit for this exam because they wanted to prove to themselves that they had the knowledge required to provide their patients with the best care possible. Many indicated that the encouragement of their managers also had significant influence on their decision to become certified.

Very few mentioned financial incentives as the main reason for becoming certified. In fact, most indicated that the institutions for which they worked did not recognize or reward certification. The few who received a financial incentive for certification said they received either a small one-time bonus or about one more dollar per hour, which came to little more than \$1,000 per year. In general, these nurses expressed strong dissatisfaction regarding the overall lack of recognition for CCRN certification among hospital administrators. Most nurses felt that hospitals should encourage and reward those who have their CCRN as a way of promoting standards of excellence.¹³

Nurses are seeking support for certification from their employers to validate their expert knowledge and to support their professional development. These goals are not at odds with the goals of healthcare systems; rather, they are congruent. Supporting certification can build the organization's relationship with valued staff while also offering a distinct point of differentiation from rival hospitals that do not share this commitment to staff.

Protecting the Public

Public protection is at the center of healthcare. Not only do health systems self-regulate their quality of care, elaborate regulatory and accreditation systems such as the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), the Department of Health and Human Services, and the state departments of health ensure that minimum standards are met. Despite these elaborate systems, errors are still made far more often than any of us would like to admit. This fact was amplified in the mainstream media following the release of the Institute of Medicine's 1999 report *To Err Is Human: Building a Safer Health System*.¹⁴ The public has become increasingly fearful of the potential for errors and will continue to demand more assurance that a health system has taken steps to prevent such errors. Nurse certification is an effective way of putting forth a mark of excellence for the system and distinguishing it from competitors. By touting a high percentage of certified nurses, a system signals that its nurses are experienced, abreast of changes in practice, and dedicated to the profession.

Adding to certification's legitimacy are the mandates for certification of advanced practice nurses. In most states, nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists seeking initial licensure and license renewal must present proof of their expert specialty knowledge. AACN Certification Corporation's CCNS credential is now approved in 18 states for validation of specialty skills. It is no less important to test and validate the expert knowledge base of bedside nurses in specialty settings.

Although certification research is in its infancy and outcomes evidence is still scant, there is growing confidence that certification can lead to better outcomes. In the research underlying the current Practice Guidelines for Pulmonary Artery Catheterization, the authors state, "Scores were better for nurses with CCRN certification, attendance at a pulmonary artery catheter class, more years of critical care experience and frequent PA catheter use."¹⁵ The researchers found significant knowledge deficits in this procedure among most nurses due to lack of or limited exposure to the subject in nursing school.¹⁵ A 1997 study comparing performance between certified and uncertified nurses suggested that certified nurses performed better than their uncertified counterparts in the areas of teaching/collaboration and planning/evaluation.¹⁶ It can be argued that experience is the critical factor in achieving better outcomes; however, how can one validate or prove that experience has led to expert knowledge? Certification offers this validation.

A common misperception is that certification increases a nurse's liability because it may hold her/him to a higher standard. Leading professional liability insurance plan administrator Marsh Affinity Group Services disagrees. They believe that additional education and training is a strength. According to Marsh's managing director, Joan O'Sullivan, "The more training you have, the better off you are. Education reduces your exposure to risk and better prepares you to make informed decisions that encompass a larger scope."¹⁷ In fact, Marsh offers CCRN-, CCNS-, and ACNP-certified nurses a 10% risk management credit on liability insurance premiums, because they "recognize the value of certification in raising the levels of competency for the nursing profession."¹⁷

Finally, the simple act of studying for a certification exam, and testing, helps nurses identify areas of weakness in their knowledge base. Literature on the subject is limited, but the AACN Certification Corporation staff often hears about this from both successful and unsuccessful exam candidates. The letter in Figure 1 illustrates this commonly told story.

The Current State

As of January 2001, nurses held more than 410,000 certifications in 134 specialties. These certifications were granted by 67 different certifying organiza-

tions, and at least 95 different credentials designate these certifications.¹² There has been a declining trend in nurse certification across most specialties since the mid- to late-1990s. Experts point to the lack of employer reimbursement and recognition as the primary reason for the decline. AACN Certification Corporation, however, has reported increases in the number of new CCRN applicants and certificants in fiscal years 2001 and 2002. One factor to which they attribute this recent increase is the resurgence in employer reimbursement and recognition as the nursing shortage worsens. Too often, employers take this cyclical and reactive approach. Consistent support of certification and other professional development opportunities demonstrates an employer's long-term commitment to nurses.

In 2001, AACN Certification Corporation and the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses collaborated on a comprehensive market study that included polling and analysis of the current state of CCRN certification. Selected findings are provided in Tables 1 and 2. Significant highlights include:

- Nurses receive minimal support and recognition for their CCRN certification from their employers. Only about 40% help to defray the cost of the exam and two thirds do not pay higher salaries.
- Of the AACN member group, 92% of the nurse managers interviewed reported that they en-

Dear *AACN News*,

Although I had been a nurse for about 12 years, the last 7 in critical care, I felt the need to learn more. I decided that studying for the CCRN exam was the best way to do this.

To prepare, I used critical care textbooks, review books, audiotapes, and practice tests, investing at least an hour or more daily for 4 months. I was shocked when, on the first practice test, I answered only about half the questions correctly. It seemed the more I learned, the more I needed to know, and the more I realized that I didn't know. It was quite an eye-opening process.

When the time came, I certainly did not feel ready to take the test. I had been sufficiently humbled by the people I had met and the material I had learned over my intense months of studying. To me, it seemed that everyone knew so much, and I knew so little. Although I was intimidated by the knowledge that I expected I should have learned, I was somehow happy and privileged to be sitting for such a prestigious exam.

When I received my test scores, I had not only passed, I had done quite well. I felt so proud that I had accomplished this goal in my life. Somehow, I knew that I would be able to deliver much better patient care with that added confidence.

I have renewed my CCRN twice and continue to read journals and attend conferences to maintain and add to the knowledge that I worked so hard to obtain. Now, as a CCRN liaison for my ICU, I am proud when one of my coworkers expresses an interest in taking the certification exam.

Making the decision to become certified is such an important step in a nurse's career. It means we have made the commitment to our specialty and to our patients. It is a part of me that I am extremely proud of.

Deborah Kummer, RN, BS, CCRN

Figure 1. One nurse's testimony: the value of studying and testing. Reprinted with permission from the author, Deborah Kummer, and *AACN News*.

Table 1. Results From AACN and AACN Certification Corporation's 2001 Market Research¹⁸

Item	Hospital Support	
	% AACN Members N = 1,203	% Nonmembers of AACN N = 550
CCRN is required in unit		
Yes	5	6
No	94	94
Don't know	1	
Hospital pays entire cost for CCRN certification exam		
Live review courses	29	22
Prep resources	21	22
Study time off	11	18
None of these	5	7
None of these	58	60
Hospital pays a higher salary to certified nurses		
Yes	30	22
No	69	68
Don't know	1	10
How much more hospital pays to certified nurses	(N=355)	(N=122)
Less than 5%	24	36
More than 5%	7	4
Less than 50 cents	13	6
50 to 99 cents	22	21
\$1.00 to \$1.99	16	15
\$2.00 or more	6	4
Don't know/refused	13	14
Nurse managers encourage certification	(N=100)	(N=33)
Yes	92	61
Sometimes	6	18
No	2	21

AACN, American Association of Critical-Care Nurses; CCRN, certified critical care nurse.

courage staff to obtain certification. Among the nonmembers, 61% reported that they encouraged certification.

- The majority of employers allow CCRNs to wear the credential on their badges.
- Overwhelmingly, nurses cite lack of study time as the main barrier to pursuing certification.

AACN has invested significant resources in promoting certification based on this study and other feedback from both certified and noncertified constituents.

How Can Employers Support Certification?

Hospitals interested in boosting professionalism on their units and enhancing their nurse retention and recruitment efforts would be well served by instituting a certification recognition program. Ideally, this program will include financial support for preparation classes and materials, the examination fee, and paid time off for preparation courses and examination time. Facilitating a tutoring system between certified

nurses on staff and those preparing for certification is a great way to aid staff in achieving certification.

Some healthcare systems, like Deaconess Hospital in Evansville, IN (Fig. 2), have created their own on-site review classes and study plan to facilitate their nurses' preparation for the exam. The convenience of on-site study sessions, and the scheduling flexibility to attend them, significantly aids in breaking down the most daunting barriers to the exam. To further motivate nurses to pursue certification, facilities may consider offering a salary differential. If this is not financially feasible, consider giving bonuses for initial achievement of certification as well as upon renewal. Although an investment of scarce dollars, when coupled with the other things that make a nurturing and healthy work environment, it has a high probability of producing significant returns in the form of increased retention rates.

While financial support is important to the nurses seeking certification, recognition is even more critical. There are several ways to acknowledge the extra efforts of your certified nurses, such as:

Table 2. Results From AACN and AACN Certification Corporation's 2001 Market Research¹⁸

Item	Personal Participation	
	% AACN Members N = 1,203	% Nonmembers of AACN N = 550
Obtained CCRN certification		
Yes	80	4
No	20	96
If not CCRN certified, what are the main barriers to becoming certified		
No time	(N=244)	(N=531)
To study for exam	42	42
Other	39	37
Cost	3	5
Of preparing for the exam	15	11
Of taking the exam	9	6
Other	5	5
Studying for/taking exams	1	0
Fear of failing	12	4
Not being prepared	7	2
Other	3	2
Not relevant to my practice	2	0
Lack of hospital support/rewards	9	6
Lack of experience/qualifications	3	3
No interest	0	6
Other	2	3
Allowed to wear certification credentials on badge	(N=1,203)	(N=550)
Yes	17	25
No	82	85
	16	12

AACN, American Association of Critical-Care Nurses; CCRN, certified critical care nurse.

- Give a paid day off to celebrate a nurse becoming certified
- Announce newly certified nurses in your organization's newsletter
- Ask your public relations department to work with you on sending a news release to local papers, both major daily papers and smaller weekly community papers
- Send news releases to nurse's school of nursing and alumni association
- Prominently display plaques highlighting the certified nurses on your units, ideally where patients and families can see them (waiting room or outside entrance to unit) and where physicians congregate in the unit
- Hold celebrations to honor your newly certified nurses
- Acknowledge certified nurses during your Nurse Week celebrations
- Allow certified nurses to include their credentials on their name badges
- Include certification as part of your professional advancement system

It is important to remember that a significant percentage of nurses do not pass the exam on the first try. For example, the CCRN exam pass rate is 65%. Supporting and encouraging nurses who do not pass the first time shows a higher degree of commitment. To maintain certification, once achieved, nurses must meet rigorous continuing education requirements. Whether promoting certification or not, employers who support their nurses' continuing education will benefit by improving recruitment and retention¹⁰ and by ensuring that their nurses stay current with advances in nursing research and practice.

Conclusion

Marketing is more than glossy promotional materials and public relations. It is the promise to deliver a superior product that meets customer needs. For hospitals, that product is nursing care. In an environment where it seldom feels as if one has control over the things that could allow their organization to excel, taking care of valuable nursing staff is one action that

In a community hospital in Evansville, Indiana, a remarkable transformation is taking shape. With a vision to provide superior nurse services to critical care patients, Director of Cardiovascular Services Maria Shirey, RN, MS, MBA, launched a critical care nurse competency program in the spring of 2000. The program consists of:

- A competency-based orientation program
- Creation of a critical care nurse float pool
- A CCRN drive to ensure that the majority of bedside nurses are certified

Shirey recruited clinical nurse specialist Lynn Schnautz, RN, MSN, CCRN, and Nurse Manager Bev Farmer, RN, MSN, CCRN, to join her in leading the effort. Together, they developed the program and gained support from the hospital's CNO and CEO. Shirey, Schnautz, and Farmer engaged a group of staff nurses in further developing the program and brainstorming ideas to generate interest among the 235 critical care nurses employed by the hospital.

At the start of the program, there were only 11 CCRNs in the hospital and only 4 of those were at the bedside. According to Shirey and Schnautz, there were only a few core people who were motivated in the early stages because the credential had not been actively recognized or promoted in the past. The team quickly pulled together all of the elements they felt were necessary to support their ambitious goals. They solicited, and received, a grant from the hospital's foundation to support the program. With this sponsorship, they were able to offer free on-site review courses including study materials and full payment of the exam fee for interested nurses. "Because time is so precious for nurses, we knew it was essential to bring the review course to them," explains Schnautz.

To receive the free instruction and exam fee, nurses must sign a contract in which they commit to studying and participating fully in the program. The review courses have also been opened up to nurses who are not employed at Deaconess. To date, 47 nurses have been sponsored for the certification exam. Of the 29 who have taken the exam, 17 have passed.

Although the program is still in its relative infancy, the drive for certification has become contagious. Shirey and Schnautz have seen tremendous positive outcomes for their nurses, their patients, and for the hospital's reputation. Among their achievements are:

- Improved collaboration and morale among the nurses involved in pursuit of the CCRN credential
- Increased interest in other critical care nurses to pursue the CCRN credential
- Positive feedback from the physicians—especially the cardiovascular surgeons—affiliated with the intensive care units
- Three news segments featuring the program on a local television station
- Petitioned and won the right to wear the credential on name badges
- Held the first annual CCRN Recognition Dinner
- Maria Shirey won the 2002 AACN Circle of Excellence award for Excellence in Leadership
- The Greater Evansville Chapter, a program partner, won the 2002 Circle of Excellence award for Chapter CCRN Certification Drive. The number of CCRNs in the chapter increased from 14 to 45, the majority of whom were employed with Deaconess Hospital
- Featured in AACN's monthly newspaper *AACN News*
- Increased Press Ganey patient satisfaction score to 98th percentile for the hospital, with cardiovascular services departments having the highest patient satisfaction scores in the hospital

"Not only are our patients more satisfied, our affiliated physicians have been very loyal with their admissions due to their preference for the nursing care at our hospital," states Shirey. Not content to rest on their laurels, Shirey, Schnautz, and Farmer are laying plans to develop and conduct a research project to demonstrate the impact of certification on patient care outcomes. Shirey, Schnautz, and Farmer firmly believe the research will demonstrate that the enhanced nurse competency associated with certification favorably impacts patient care outcomes.

Figure 2. Deaconess Hospital's Critical Care Nurse Competency Program and Critical Care Registered Nurse Drive.

will reap benefits. Certification and its educational underpinnings are a significant way to create an environment of respect and support.

Marketing must include attention to what happens on the inside of an organization, rather than fo-

cusing solely on promotion to the outside world. While both actions are imperative, organizations who start from the inside out wear the mark of experienced and ethical marketers. By providing nurses with the reward, recognition, and respect

they expect and deserve through support of certification programs, savvy administrators will build staff loyalty that will give them the edge in a market where nurses are increasingly scarce.

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