

# The Role of Branding and Thought Leadership

to Help Referral-Based Practices  
Market Effectively



**AMG.**  
HEALTHCARE MARKETING

In today's competitive environment, consumers have more options than ever to address their healthcare concerns. This is especially true in a digital era in which the ["consumerization of healthcare"](#) means that savvy prospects often rely on their own resources to find the specialists they need.

In that light, practices that depend upon the traditional approaches to marketing through lunch-and-learn networking and word-of-mouth advertising are missing out on the full marketing potential at their fingertips. Instead, a direct-to-consumer approach is needed to help prospective patients select specific providers when they're given the option to do so.

In a study published in the *Journal of Services Marketing*, ["Healthcare Branding: Developing Emotionally Based Consumer-Brand Relationships,"](#) the authors describe key dynamics related to the important role of emotions in building ongoing relationships with healthcare brands.

A significant factor in this context is the personalized, intimate consumer experience involved in relationships with healthcare providers. As such, it's not surprising that study

results uncovered the important role of trust when it comes to consumer loyalty and optimizing marketing efforts.

As the authors note, "Once affective commitment is achieved, consumers may come to identify with the healthcare provider's brand and a self-brand connection is formed. When such a phenomenon takes place, consumers can serve as advocates for the brand by actively promoting it via word-of-mouth."

In this whitepaper, we apply these and other research findings to marketing strategies for referral-based specialty practices—including the role that branding and thought leadership play within the four stages of patient acquisition:

- 1. Awareness: Brand Yourself**
- 2. Engagement and Education: Differentiate Yourself**
- 3. Acquire New Patients: Patients Learn About You and Visit**
- 4. Upsell and Inspire Referrals: Current Customers Are Your Best Advertisers**





## 1. AWARENESS: Brand Yourself

Effective **branding is critical** because it contains the promise you make to consumers about the kind of care you will consistently deliver. Thus, it requires “a solid, organized commitment to delivering unique standards of consistency” through the services you provide.

Citing previous research, the authors of the study note that service providers “build strong brands through distinctiveness, performance, message consistency, and by appealing to consumers emotionally” and that “cultivating meaningful brand connections with consumers can achieve differential and competitive advantage in the marketplace.”

The authors note that “affective commitment” is an essential role in this process. Affective commitment is often referenced within an employee-employer context—which is based on early research about what creates commitment to an organization.

In an article that appeared in a 1991 issue of Human Resources Management, “A three-component conceptualization of organizational commitment,” John P. Meyer and Natalie J. Allen describe organizational commitment as existing in three separate components that reflect:

- “A desire (affective commitment)”
- “A need (continuance commitment)”
- “An obligation (normative commitment)”

In the marketing world, these principles have been applied to describe the dynamics of customer commitment to a brand: “You can think of affective, continuance, and normative

commitments as coming from dedication, situations, and obligation respectively.”

Since affective commitment is linked to the emotional connection a consumer has for a specific brand, it’s not surprising that the authors of the healthcare branding study say that brand trust is a critical factor that contributes to affective commitment and is influenced by:

- A consumers’ attitude toward the brand
- Customer-oriented behavior as displayed by the provider

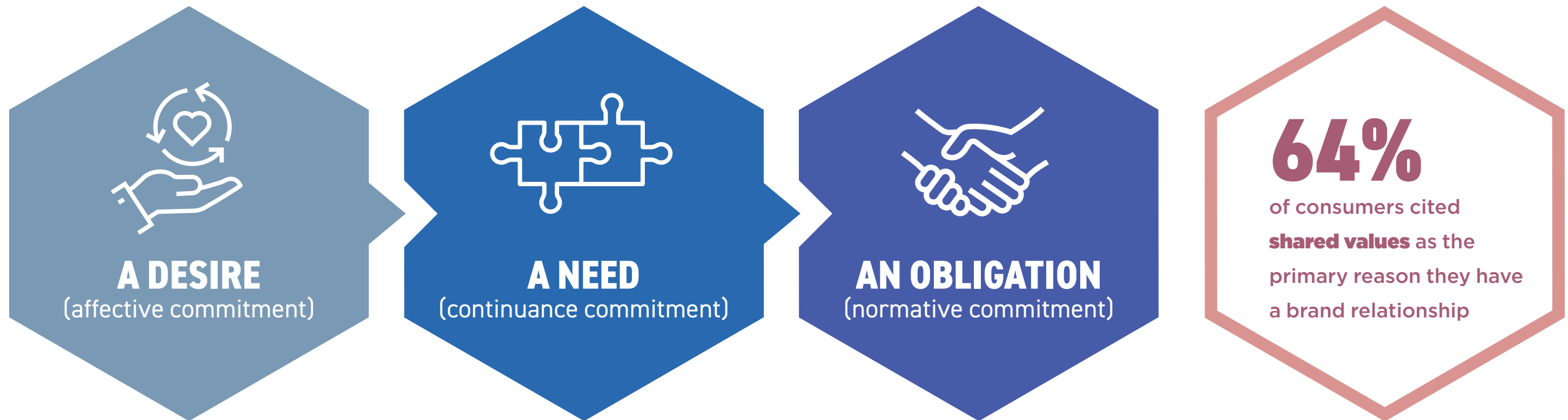
When affective commitment is achieved, the outcome is a self-brand connection that can

benefit both the consumer and provider in a variety of ways.

Experts from consulting firm Gartner (formerly CEB) share a similar perspective about [the role of emotions and affective commitment in brand relationships:](#)

“Of the consumers in our study who said they have a brand relationship, 64% cited shared values as the primary reason. That’s far and away the largest driver.”

That means commitment to your brand can be more easily achieved if you get your branding strategy right—and deliver on what you promise.



## 2. ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION: Differentiate Yourself

Thought leadership is an essential component of effective healthcare branding. In fact, the authors of the [healthcare branding study](#) found that one of the distinct factors that drives brand trust is the “perceived quality of the healthcare provider’s brand.”

One avenue of helping consumers understand the quality you provide is by educating them in a way that communicates your expertise and differentiates you from competitors. An important method of doing so is by engaging with them through various online channels.

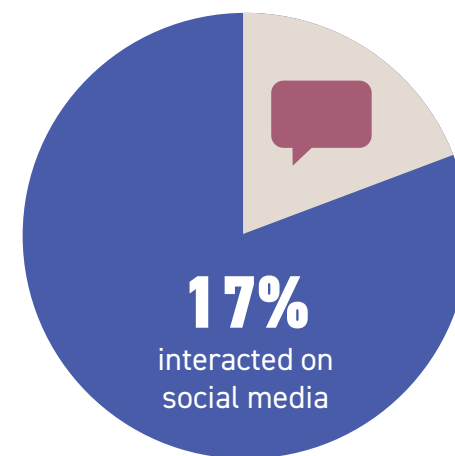
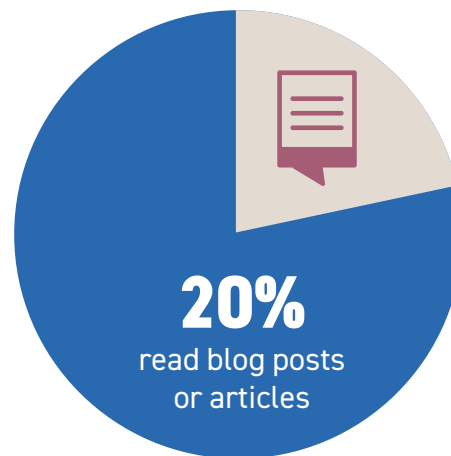
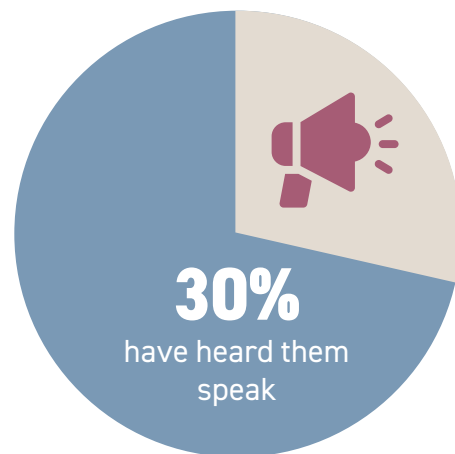
A report from the Hinge Research Institute, [“Referral Marketing for Professional Services Firms,”](#) notes that data from over 523 professional services firms revealed that over 48 percent of referrals were “expertise-based,” with sources that included:

- **Speaking: 30% of respondents said “I’ve heard them speak”**
- **Online publications: 20% of respondents said “I read blog posts or articles they’ve written”**
- **Social media: 17% of respondents said “I’ve interacted with them on social media”**

As a result, the report concluded that “a vibrant online presence and effort to share the expertise of your firm’s professionals is the key to generating expertise-based referrals.”

[Adobe’s December 2019 consumer survey](#) confirms the importance of a vibrant online presence for healthcare providers, noting that of individuals surveyed—ranging from 18 to 55+ years of age—an average of 60 percent indicated they go online first to research symptoms. For providers seeking to attract new patients, this “digital-first mentality” requires “personalized, digital engagements that offer consumers the information they’re seeking in the channel they’re seeking it...”.

**Over 64%**  
of referrals were  
**“expertise-based,”**  
with sources that  
included:



### 3. ACQUIRE NEW PATIENTS:

## Patients Learn About You and Visit

However, just being discoverable online isn't enough—since clear messaging about your expertise and unique services is a key component of drawing prospects in.

The [Hinge Research Institute report](#) notes that over 51 percent of respondents decided against a referral before even speaking with a firm—citing two primary reasons that was the case:

Lack of clarity—about “services, expertise or capabilities.” This demonstrates the need for clear messaging that focuses on educating prospects about what you can and will uniquely provide. Poor reputation—which underscores the need to optimize the patient experience to ensure that word-of-mouth and online reviews portray you in a positive light.

Noting that 46 percent of referrals in its study were “reputation-based,” the Institute reports that the majority of respondents (55%) learned about a firm “through colleagues and friends” and nearly half (45%) said the firm had “a good reputation.”

Helping prospects to learn about your expertise

and excellent reputation through various channels will hopefully lead to a new patient visit—giving you the chance to start building a relationship of trust and emotional commitment.

As the [healthcare branding study](#) notes, brand relationships can be “cognitively-based and simply habitual,”—or based on emotions. The

latter is the preference, since it can provide a competitive edge: “When an emotionally based relationship exists between a consumer and a brand, it can give an organization a competitive advantage, making the brand resistant to competitive attacks because of robust attitudes held toward the brand by the consumer.”

## Over 51%

decided against a referral due to:



**Lack of clarity about services, expertise or capabilities**



**Poor reputation - must optimize patient experiences to avoid negative reviews**



## 4. UPSELL AND INSPIRE REFERRALS: Current Customers Are Your Best Advertisers

Such robust attitudes of loyalty inspire referrals, since patients who are pleased with your services and offerings are your best advertisers. This dynamic is related to the affective commitment described previously and reinforced by a [Nielsen report](#) that underscores the key role that “earned advertising” plays within the referral-marketing context:

- “**Word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and family, often referred to as earned advertising, are still the most influential, as 84 percent of global respondents across 58 countries to the Nielsen online survey said this source was the most trustworthy.**”
- “**Sixty-eight percent of survey respondents indicated that they trust consumer opinions posted online...**”

Another important factor in referral-marketing is referent influence, as the [healthcare branding study](#) describes: “Referent influence, specifically word of mouth and advice from ‘important others,’ will impact affective commitment to a healthcare provider.”

Such dynamics underscore the need to view “customers” as both prospective patients and colleagues or other entities who trust you enough to send someone they care about to your door. Receivers of referrals are extensions of referral sources, since these sources put their own reputations on the line by displaying their trust in you. This underscores the importance of building solid and loyal relationships with anyone who can be your next “best advertiser.”

**84%**

of respondents say that **word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and family are still the most trustworthy referrals.**



**68%**

of respondents say they trust **consumer opinions posted online.**

# GETTING THE HELP YOU NEED TO Optimize Your Referral-Marketing Efforts

At AMG, we're the experts when it comes to creating and deploying referral-marketing strategies that can help you effectively achieve the four stages of patient acquisition to increase brand awareness, stand out from the competition, and create relationships of trust.

After all, as part of Advance Local Media, we're a local company with a national reach that can offer:

- **The best digital marketing technology**
- **An in-house data management platform**
- **Search solutions**
- **Content marketing solutions**

Ranked [among the top ten publishers in the nation](#), our network of ten local media groups each occupy the #1 position in their respective markets. That kind of experience and reach equates to:

- **52,000,000 monthly unique visitors**
- **11,000,000 social fans and followers**
- **700+ awards for journalism excellence**

As a result, we own the largest healthcare audience in Alabama. That means we can offer our clients an array of unique services to help you boost your visibility, increase your online presence, optimize your reach, and enhance the flow of prospects arriving at your doors. We do that through our private practice marketing solutions that include:

- **Patient Acquisition**
- **Brand Awareness**
- **Thought Leadership and Community Outreach**
- **Co-Op Activation for Select Service Lines**
- **Doctor-to-Doctor Referral Marketing**

If you would like to learn more about how AMG can help your referral-based practice achieve the marketing results you need,

**contact us today.**

