

The Challenge of Controlling Competitiveness

The only constant in the air medical industry seems to be change. This change has manifested mainly in the growth of the number of aircraft. Traditional and freestanding programs, whether profit or nonprofit, have purchased more ships. With this growth has come competition for market share. The upside of competition has been the opening of new markets for air medical programs. The old “zero-sum” paradigm has been replaced with “build it and they will come.”

This growth makes sense within our country’s capitalist system. Competition is a natural component of capitalism and the free market system. Ideal competition is a balance of free markets and regulation. Competition also leads to several phenomena. The best performers, companies, and programs tend to rise to the top, whereas poor performance is penalized by loss of market share.

Another capitalist phenomena—a potential danger in our industry—is competitiveness. Uncontrolled competitiveness can drive unsafe practices and lead to poor operational decisions, inferior patient care, and loss of personal or program focus.

Ask yourself the following questions about your program, your colleagues, and you:

- Does competitiveness take priority over safety?
- Does the need to be competitive outweigh or affect your safety margin?
- Does competitiveness win over delivering quality patient care?
- Does maintaining your competitive advantage take up more time than maintaining your safety program?
- Does competitiveness drive or change your focus on why you do what you do?
- Are you working just to beat the other guy?
- Does competitiveness rule your life or your program?
- Competitiveness may not be totally controlled, but it can be addressed on a variety of levels. Programs should do everything to maintain focus on their primary mission. Maintaining an acceptable safety margin and standard of care are paramount. Setting standards within the organization or program, keeping a positive emotional climate, and swiftly punishing unacceptable behavior can help control competitiveness.

The real responsibility lies on each transport team member.

Competitiveness can lead us to make decisions based on emotion rather than intelligence. If a competitor places an aircraft at your best customer’s facility or spreads misinformation about your program, your first instinct may be to do or say something you may regret later. Use intelligence rather than emotion to guide your action plan.

The most important task is to maintain your focus and stay on mission. Having a set of personal standards or rules of engagement can help with this. When faced with a decision that may be driven by competition, you can stay within those standards or rules. On a deeply personal level, you must express gratitude for being in this business and refuse to let things bother you.

As competition increases, programs and organizations must have a plan not only to control competitiveness but to flourish in such an environment. Programs that flourish in a competitive environment have the following things in common:

- They learn from mistakes.
- They are knowledgeable of the political environment surrounding them.
- They do more with less.
- They know their demographics, statistics, and financial bottom line because they document and measure everything.
- They exhibit curiosity before condemnation.
- They examine what the competition is doing well and make note of it.
- They compete with themselves to be the best and strive for excellence.

The competitive trends emerging in our industry will continue. The number of aircraft will continue to grow. The number of traditional programs will decrease as the number of freestanding programs increases. Aircraft will be placed where the patients are, not strictly on top of tertiary care hospitals.

As an industry, we must face the challenges of positively managing growth and controlling competitiveness. Maintaining an acceptable safety margin and clinical edge should be our goal. Instituting the standards developed by the Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems industry-wide would be a good start. Make no mistake—individuals and organizations that take advantage of loose regulation and

meet minimal expectations or requirements damage our industry.

The key to competitiveness is a balance of regulation, free markets, industry leadership, and personal responsibility, and we each play a part in securing that balance.

Kevin High, RN, MPH, EMT, is a clinical outreach nurse with Vanderbilt LifeFlight and a consultant with Think Through Tools in Nashville, Tennessee.

1067-991X/\$30.00

Copyright 2004 by Air Medical Journal Associates

doi:10.1016/j.amj.2004.01.003