

Marketing Matters



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In January 2010 I'll be teaching the first-ever Healthcare Marketing course offered at the Edgewood College MBA program. The course is intended for graduate students in business and nursing, as well as healthcare professionals interested in learning more about the marketing aspects of healthcare while taking the course as non-degree students. The most exciting thing about it, however, is that business schools are finally recognizing that marketing in healthcare organizations presents unique challenges, and deserves special attention in their curriculum. Even the format will be innovative; it's an 8-week evening course whose focus will be on creative ideas, case studies, and action plans rather than memorizing terms for exams.

Of course my own healthcare marketing background is largely in the area of hospice and palliative care, though I believe it's impossible for someone to make a positive contribution to hospice without also having a solid understanding of hospitals, nursing homes, family medical practices, and a host of other organizations. For all the differences you can identify across types of health care organizations, you can also see common challenges, you can find best practices that are easily adaptable from one to the other, and you can gain insights about your own organization that you wouldn't have without acquiring a broader perspective.

That broader perspective is invaluable; there's a lot to be learned from studying government reports on the challenges faced by Canadian hospices or by looking at innovative fundraising ideas implemented by hospices in Great Britain. And if you think that an experience with a hospital receptionist in Switzerland (a trilingual country—not counting English, which is also widely spoken) who can't so much as say hello in anything but German can't make you think about how a hospice in Wisconsin could fail patients, you're probably not paying very close attention. My own appreciation of hospices is owed in large part to the fact that I grew up in a country where the concept of hospice is simply unknown, and where healthcare in general is good if you're paying in cash, but frighteningly inadequate if you're not.

How do you and your staff acquire that breadth of perspective? It's not easy, given the fact that most hospice professionals are not desperately looking for a new task to allocate hours of spare time to. But "easy" is not the standard here; everyone

can do things that come easily. The challenge is to take on tasks that are often neglected by most hospice organizations; it's how you can make your hospice stand out, and how you can differentiate yourself from other providers. If that breadth of perspective is something you really value, then it's important enough to acquire. The only question is "how?"

Not every hospice has staff with experience in other areas of health care, different competitive circumstances than your hospice is currently facing, or even other cultures. Even if yours does, it's often difficult for that person to share their unique experiences with others in your hospice—especially if they're not intimately involved with staff training, internal marketing and strategic planning. Of course you can have someone take a Healthcare Marketing course (if one is offered in your part of the State), though even then you have to make tough choices with respect to resources: Is it better to have a single staff member take an entire course on marketing health care, or to have a speaker or trainer come to your hospice and speak to your entire staff for roughly the same cost? Or is it better to retain a consultant who has diverse experience rather than being narrowly focused on hospice matters? That individual can likely provide advice on areas ranging from marketing and strategic planning to patient and employee satisfaction; advice that is informed by that breadth of experience. Some hospices may have the resources to do all of the above, while others may have to make some difficult choices.

How can you make the right choice? I am a member of the HOPE of Wisconsin because I consider my membership to be both valuable and important. If you paid your membership dues, you might as well get your money's worth too! If you never looked at how other State Hospice organizations work before, it's worth a look: Some states don't even have a state hospice organization! Some have state organizations that are struggling, disorganized, and lacking in both expertise and resources. Ours has a world-class organization, with an Executive Director who does have that breadth of perspective that spans types of health care organizations, cultures, and competitive environments—and is thus able to provide you with invaluable insights. When in doubt about how to allocate your scarce Marketing dollars, your education budget, your research projects, or any other scarce resources, remember that guess work is as good as rolling dice: Instead, call the HOPE of Wisconsin and ask! Having top-notch resources and not using them is simply a sin.

This is my last column of 2009, and by the time you read another one you will have already made your New Year's resolutions. Make sure some of them, at least, involve doing what it takes to make your hospice bigger, better, more competitive, more creative, and equipped with more strategic marketing insights than ever before! One of mine is to reach out to more hospices across the State and across the country and help them in their quest to offer more people the highest quality of care. Happy holidays to all!