



Marketing Matters

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Beginning this month, Marketing Matters, will appear in this newsletter alternating monthly with a “A Legal View.” The following is an interview with Dr. Altsech to set the framework for a better understanding of marketing for hospices.

WHT: Let’s begin with a definition of marketing. I think many hospice and health care professionals in general think it is something like used car sales.

MA: Those who consider Marketing a dirty word often cite examples of its misuse to justify that point of view. However, even lifesaving medicine is deadly if it’s misused. Marketing is a Tool—and if used right, it’s a magnificent tool that can help hospices and health care organizations thrive and become more successful. Often people confuse marketing with sales or promoting a product; Marketing encompasses all these things and more. Marketing is about satisfying customer needs at a profit (yes, even nonprofits need to have revenues greater than their expenses, or they won’t be doing their good work for very long!) Customer satisfaction involves using the right Marketing mix—the right product or service, price, place and promotion—to meet their needs and hopefully exceed them. Marketing is not just “helpful” anymore; it’s absolutely necessary to any organization that strives for continuous improvement in how it serves people.

WHT: Why should hospices be concerned about marketing? After all, everyone will have an “end-of-life” and need hospice.

MA: I’ll be the first person to say that everyone does need hospice, and that everyone is better off with hospice than without it. But people don’t often do what’s best for them. There are a great many people out there who don’t even know what hospice is, especially younger people who think hospice is a cheap place to spend the night when you go backpacking in Europe. In order to use hospice services, one must be aware of them first! And awareness by itself is not enough; people need to be convinced that this is not just an option, but the best option. When it comes to hospice, people have choices too—they can opt out altogether if they don’t fully understand its value, or if they have the wrong perception of what hospice can do for them. The use of Marketing can raise awareness, but also convey the nature and value of hospice care. Marketing can also ensure that the needs of patients and families are indeed met adequately. It can help with fundraising and do so much more that’s essential to hospice care providers and the people they serve.

WHT: If a hospice has a nice marketing brochure developed, to whom should it be sent? How does one find potential customers?

MA: The most important thing in raising awareness is understanding that one size fits all only when it comes to socks, so the message needs to be tailored to the audience. That doesn’t mean a hundred different brochures, but it does mean creating different approaches to reach referral sources versus the general public. Relationships with referral sources are, of course, critical, and deserve a strategic rather than haphazard approach. Studying demographic trends to determine the profile of not only current, but future hospice care beneficiaries will help determine how to best reach them. That’s the value of Marketing; it allows targeting the right people with the right materials at the right time and place!

WHT: It seems that many hospice professionals think that because they do the special work of caring for the terminally ill the word will get around and that will be sufficient. Do you agree that is likely? Why or why not?

MA: I often call the “If you build it, they will come” mentality a “going out of business sale” waiting to happen. The most spectacular product or the most remarkable service will remain unused if people don’t know about it, if they’re not convinced it’s right for them, and if they don’t prefer it over other available options. Doesn’t “word get around” regardless? Sometimes it does, but there are steps hospice organizations can take to make sure it does, and that the “word” that gets around is accurate, powerful and reaches the right people. It makes no sense to leave things to chance when you can actually shape them to promote your good work.

WHT: Some hospice administrators may think it would just be a lot of extra work to develop some big marketing campaign. Are there some ways to make a marketing campaign doable for a busy administrator?

MA: Hospice administrators are responsible for making sure their organizations thrive and continue to serve as many people as possible in the best possible way: it is simply not possible to do that in an optimal way without the use of Marketing. Of course expertise is domain-specific, and a busy hospice administrator may not have the background (or the time) to create a Strategic Marketing Plan or a Patient Satisfaction training program for staff. But who said a great leader is supposed to do everything alone? Leadership involves delegating important tasks to people with the credentials and competence to see them through. Don’t think of Marketing as a daunting task; think of it as an opportunity for growth and prosperity, and if you have too much on your plate already, get someone to do it for you!

WHT: The concept of “the curse of knowledge” is common in many fields and areas of business and definitely seems to stifle innovation. Do you think it is greater or less so in health care? In hospice in particular?

MA: When people think of creativity, they often think of inspiring art, beautifully designed products, or very original ads. Make no mistake though, the artists, the product designers, the ad copy writers all have intricate knowledge and expertise in their fields. Knowledge doesn’t stifle anything at all—let alone creativity or innovation—unless we let it happen. If anything, emphasizing creativity and fostering a culture of innovation can be an explicit and integral part of a strategic Marketing Plan: Becoming more purposeful can actually make an organization more innovative—not less, and that applies to health care organizations and hospices. In order to do that, though, we need to establish and encourage a culture of innovation and empower our people to try new ideas as well as inject our organization with the fresh perspective of outside experts. It’s not only possible to do, but actually essential.

WHT: Cynthia Rabe in her 2006 book, “Innovation Killer: How What We Know Limits What We Can Imagine—and What Smart Companies Are Doing About It,” proposes bringing in outsiders whom she calls “zero gravity thinkers” to keep creativity and innovation on track in an organization. Do you agree or disagree with her thesis? Why or why not?

MA: It often takes someone else to point out the fact that there’s a stain on your tie or the glasses you’re looking for are actually in your shirt pocket. The third party viewpoint is always different from one’s own, which makes it much more useful. One can be skeptical of outsiders, or welcome them as the bearers of a fresh perspective, in-depth expertise, and unique insights. Trying to do everything in-house is often not possible due to time and budget constraints, nor would it be a good idea in the first place: using expert advice is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of strength and foresight. Even Fortune 500 companies with giant Marketing departments bring in outside experts precisely in order to benefit from their distinct competencies and original thinking—and it’s even more critical for smaller organizations, especially hospices to aspire to do even more good for even more people in the future!