

# Marketing Matters

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Planning is essential when it comes to tackling Marketing-related challenges that hospices face, but all the planning in the world can't change your organization's future without the determination to follow through, and take action to bring the plan to life. And determination to follow through is something that many hospices lack.

The fact that some truths are hard to swallow doesn't make them less true: I've spoken to hundreds of hospice professionals at annual conferences in several states, worked with individual hospices (to say nothing of other healthcare organizations), the *Strategic Marketing Toolkit: Success Strategies for Hospice* has been purchased by hospices across the country, and this column has been torturing the readers of the *Wisconsin Hospice Times* for a while now: Clearly I've made a case for the value of Strategic Planning, Marketing Planning, measuring patient satisfaction, employee satisfaction, using volunteers more strategically, and other Marketing-related topics; I've made that case more than once and without mincing words. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and there seems to be consensus that these are important issues to address. And yet I still come across hospices that haven't pulled the proverbial trigger; they haven't taken action on making improvements in a lot of these important areas.

I must confess it's a bit baffling: Going to conferences and sitting through sessions while taking copious notes, buying a Toolkit, reading a column; these all require an investment in both time and money. Why, then, would someone not use what they learn? Why would they not take action? It's like going to the doctor, paying for the visit, buying the expensive drugs prescribed to you, and then opting not to take them. The joke, I assure you, is not on the doctor. You're only hurting yourself.

One of my favorite books is Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and the final sentence of that book is eerily relevant to this: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." We make an effort to move

forward, struggling to get ahead, and we're barely making progress against a relentless force that pushes us back. We want to embrace Marketing because we realize its value; we read about it, we talk about it, we resolve to become more Marketing-savvy and cutting-edge, but in the end we get caught up in the daily routine, we go from putting out one fire to the next, and we either fail to engage in meaningful planning when it comes to Marketing activities, or we simply never make it out of the starting gate when it comes to implementation. How do we get unstuck?

There's a leadership crisis in hospice and palliative care. At the national level there are some who wouldn't know hospice Marketing from a hole in the ground. At the State level many organizations are providing guidance and resources to their members, though some are struggling—and in some there's barely a State organization at all. At the individual hospice level, most for-profit and a few non-profit hospices are extremely Marketing-savvy, while many others seem to still be wandering for forty years in the desert, taking little or no action on important Marketing issues. I always tell my clients that the buck stops at the top: When you have a bad experience at the Sheraton, you don't hate Jerry, the obnoxious kid at the front desk; you're mad at Sheraton hotels everywhere. It's the manager who should take the blame for having hired Jerry in the first place. Accordingly, when a hospice hasn't heeded the call to take Marketing seriously, to strategically plan its Marketing activities, and to execute a cutting-edge Marketing program, it's the Executive Director's fault. Nodding in agreement that Marketing is important makes no difference unless you take action. So act! I promise you, not everything will work out the way you want: You'll make mistakes and learn from them; you'll try things that won't always be effective—but with every bold step you'll be a little closer to making your hospice better, stronger, less vulnerable to competitors.

Ideas are often cheap, and without the planning and determination to execute them, they'll never come to life. Even great ideas mean nothing if we don't have the will and strength to see them through. Don't let your hospice become its own worst enemy, because your inaction can cause you far greater harm than any competitor could. And the great news is that it's easy to put a swift end to the leadership crisis, presuming your organization suffers from one. All it takes is top leadership commitment, and taking the time to create buy-in throughout the organization. It all starts with a decision.

I'll close with one more personal example of taking action: For several months I'd been considering ways to promote the use of Marketing by hospice and palliative care organizations even more. I finally decided to take the time to create a site dedicated to just that: It's how [www.marketinghospice.com](http://www.marketinghospice.com) was born—because marketing hospice and palliative care is simply a necessity, not a marginal or optional activity, and the more hospice organizations embrace that, the more people they'll be able to reach out and offer compassionate care to. Marketinghospice.com also offers you the chance to browse through my previous "Marketing Matters" columns by topic and share them with others on your staff, lest they forget.

Speaking of that, as you're reading this, I'm on my way to Georgia, where GHPCO is truly taking a leadership role in bringing together hospice professionals from several Southern states for a two-day program aptly titled "Marketing Matters." There will be a lot to cover, including the fact that hospices can come find a lot of common ground among them without losing the ability to differentiate themselves from competitors. Let the belief that Marketing does matter be part of that common ground, coupled with the knowledge that decisive action is required for Marketing to really be meaningful at all. As the Founder of Marketing Hospice, clearly this is something I sincerely believe in.