

# Marketing Matters

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**Professor Moses Altsech, Ph.D.**

**CEO, Marketing Hospice**

**<http://www.marketinghospice.com>; (608) 213-4110**

It's not easy to describe a hospice organization in a very concise, specific way precisely because hospice organizations are so very different from one another. They undoubtedly have some fundamental common traits, much like a glider and an Airbus 330 or rock climbing and soccer have some common traits. As these examples demonstrate, however, the differences can be substantial as well. It is important to understand the differences: First, it's a matter of understanding your competitors, your partners, and yourself better. All three are not simply vital; they're a matter of survival. Second, through that understanding, you can become more effective at identifying your Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats and using them to become better at Strategic Planning and Marketing.

Attempting to categorize hospices would have to take into account a number of dimensions: For instance, some have a hospice house while others do not; some are very large and some tiny; some are part of hospital systems and others free-standing; some are non-profit community hospices and others formidable for-profits. It's meaningful to take these distinctions into account, since making sweeping generalizations can lead to inaccurate and simplistic conclusions (e.g., "non-profit community hospices are small; for-profit hospices are large"). Examining each of these dimensions—and there are more that I won't list here—into account can help paint a more complete picture of the resources, challenges, administrative and decision-making structures, flexibility, and priorities that correspond to each type of hospice.

On this other hand, just this week I heard a business school professor advocate this: "You shouldn't worry about what your competition is doing," he said, "and shouldn't take into account competitors' offerings and actions, because your aim should not be to emulate them. You should only focus on what you ought to be doing yourself; your own plans and aspirations—and looking at competitors will only serve to distract you. Looking at competitors is a waste of time." He actually said it more than once—as we professors are often known to do—and therefore left no room for the possibility that perhaps I had misheard or misunderstood. Thinking

back on it, I still find it stunning that someone who is presumably an expert would make such a statement; a statement that's either misguided or misleading or both. Studying competitors, and doing so thoroughly and on an ongoing basis, monitoring their actions, their advertising and publicity efforts, their personnel changes, and more, is not done because you aspire to "emulate them" and it certainly is not "distracting." Monitoring the environment, including but not limited to competitors, provides you with valuable information that could well be of strategic value. It will allow you to identify opportunities competitors have neglected to pursue, and give you early warning of competitive moves that could pose future threats to your own organization. It may even generate ideas for what you should do—or what you should do differently. Competitive assessment is not intended to copy competitors; merely to understand them, evaluate them, and make more informed decisions in competing with them.

In addition to looking at specific hospices you compete with in your area, it's important to study hospice categories (using some of the dimensions we mentioned above), since they can reveal common traits that entire clusters—or segments—of hospices similar to yours and those you compete with share. For example, you may determine that not all non-profit hospices are small and have inadequate resources: If you're preparing to compete with for-profits, you may end up facing a powerful competitor who is large, strong, but not-for-profit (and very different from the for-profit competitors you had been preparing to face). You may realize that hospices that are part of a hospital system may have both terrific advantages and severe drawbacks as a result of that affiliation: The sooner you identify those, the better—since your competitors may not be as self-aware as you think.

You may even come to the rather sobering realization that some types of hospices have high-profile national representation—while the interests of many other hospices have long been left in the dust. If you're part of a community non-profit hospice, that realization alone should lead to an urgent call to action; the lack of that realization may allow competitors with deep pockets to eat you alive. Sometimes it really comes down to this: Either you wake up or your hospice is as good as gone. How important do you think understanding competitors is *now*?

Hospices that share common traits with yours may face common challenges, and there may be opportunities to partner with them, pool resources, share ideas, and form common strategic and tactical action plans to tackle these concerns. Other hospices in your segment, whether you compete with them directly or not, can be potential allies on issues you can't afford to ignore—and not being aware of the room for mutually beneficial alliances is rather commonplace: It's one of the many benefits of participating in your annual State hospice conference; it offers a unique forum and the opportunity to discuss strategic issues that often require urgent attention.

Here's one last thing: I really enjoy reading; so far this year I've read thirty-nine books. If you're looking to read something enjoyable, pick up Katharine

Hepburn's *Me* or David Sedaris's *Holidays on Ice*; both are terrific books! This column, however, is not meant to be leisure reading; it's intended to mobilize you to action: Reading it but not acting on it is like buying tires without owning a car. I hope you'll put it to good use!