

Marketing Matters



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Every once in a while I read a restaurant review in the paper that describes a little diner or quaint bistro as one of the area's "best-kept secrets." And, every time that happens, I can't help but feel a little bit sorry for the owners (not too sorry though; they could've hired *me* and not remained a secret for that long!) Sure, they got a nice write-up in the newspaper, but who wants to be the proverbial best-kept secret? Some of those "secret" places are hardly new, but rather magnificent little corners that have been around a long time, delighting their customers—at least the few customers they have. The owner of a restaurant, a retail store, a hotel, should cringe at the thought of having an extraordinary place that few people have heard of.

So should a hospice.

There are, of course, many ways to get the word out. Just being there and doing good work is not one of them! Getting the word out, in fact, can and *should* be done through a system of Marketing-related activities, including your hospice's public education efforts, assigning Marketing roles to hospice volunteers, and a multitude of others. A vital part of those efforts must be marketing to the media!

Consider that the media are a target audience too: More than just being a vehicle that facilitates getting your message across, they are an audience with its own distinct needs, interests, and idiosyncrasies that your organization must understand in order to effectively partner with media. Not unlike building relationships with referral sources in order to create a strong, enduring referral network, the most effective way to interact with media is to establish and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship.

Some hospices have local TV media that can reach a great many people in a vivid audiovisual format—but one that usually involves very short segments. Radio programs also have the potential to reach large audiences, and although the visual component is not there, often the airtime at your disposal is considerably more

substantial than it would be on TV. Your local newspaper is a great outlet too, with the added benefit in some rural areas of a more loyal readership and a longer “shelf life” that more than compensate for the limited circulation. There are more media to speak of, but let’s focus on these very commonly used types for now.

Having been a media source for journalists working in television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, I’ve learned a bit about what makes their life easier: Access is important to reporters; when they seek out a source, they’re more likely to reach out to someone who is easy to contact and readily available. An exciting, lively, articulate speaker is essential for television and radio—but concise, memorable statements make any journalist’s life much easier: Whether you’re being interviewed at a studio or by someone writing an article for print media, the interviewer is essentially looking for sound bites. Maybe we’ve learned to think of sound bites as cheap sensationalism devoid of substance, but we’ve learned wrong. Sound bites are—or should be—brief, meaningful, attention-getting insights that fit in the context of the news story. Whoever interacts with the media on behalf of your hospice really ought to be a skilled communicator; preferably outgoing and lively, but definitely concise and powerful in their choice of words. Otherwise the editing required is very time consuming, and time is often a very scarce commodity for media professionals. If dealing with your hospice becomes cumbersome or uninteresting, maintaining a relationship with the media is a long shot at best.

Of course being available is one thing, and being proactive is quite another: Relationship building means reaching out to the media on an ongoing basis: let them know—and well in advance—that something new and exciting is going on at your hospice, about your upcoming event, your volunteer recognition, a children’s education program you organized at the local school. Ask the media to sponsor your event, making them more likely to cover it. Get advance publicity for some events in order to increase participation, or have the actual events covered to increase awareness.

In addition to the immediate, tangible benefits—a higher turnout or improved fundraising, for instance—you’ll also strengthen your brand in the community, including the public in general, prospective employees, future patients, referral sources, donors, and more. The value of the stronger brand that favorable media exposure can contribute to cannot be overstated.

Send to each of your local media contacts your newsletter, a holiday card, a calendar, an invitation to your special event; stay in touch, keep them engaged, informed, and turn them into hospice champions. None of it can happen without framing the media as a target audience and directing systematic, compelling Marketing efforts to them. Marketing to the media will become part of your Strategic Marketing Plan, which, undoubtedly, every hospice has by now.