

Marketing Matters



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“Experience is a good teacher,” Minna Thomas Antrim wrote, “but she sends in terrific bills.” In short, we were put on notice long ago that trial and error is quite expensive as an instructional method. Antrim should know a little bit about experience; she was five years old at the start of the U.S. Civil War and died during Truman’s second term. You can’t simply write off the “error” part that comes with trial, since sometimes its cost can be altogether overwhelming.

As valuable as experience may be, for most people it’s domain-specific: You may have a great deal of experience in arranging guided tours to the Far East, but none in organizing high tech trade shows. A very experienced sculptor may have never made a single oil painting; it’s just difficult to accumulate experience in too many areas, especially on a professional level. Also, a great deal of experience does not necessarily equate to mastery: They often go hand in hand, but experience refers to getting a lot of practice over time, and expertise refers to possessing skill and proficiency. It’s possible to have a professional with a lot of experience who’s still lousy at the job, and equally possible to have a true expert without a great deal of experience. Clearly you’re better off when you work with people who have both.

Why the fuss about experience and expertise? I thought you’d never ask: A trait of highly driven leaders seems to be a desire to do everything single-handedly, perhaps out of sheer conviction that no one else could do something quite as well. They have trouble delegating, or trouble delegating without micromanaging people to death. Delegation is, of course, inevitable: No hospice director, for instance, can be a nurse, an accountant, a public relations director, a human resources manager, and wear several other hats all at once; it’s not possible (or at least not possible if things are to be done right). A single individual can’t have experience in all those areas, and certainly not expertise in all of them. Sometimes, in fact, entire organizations can’t have the experience and expertise required to complete certain vital tasks.

A few weeks ago I had a conversation with a CEO about all matters related to Marketing and Strategic Planning. He told me that he was planning to hire a Marketing Director soon, who would be in charge of a broad array of tasks, from writing newsletters and issuing press releases to overseeing branding, new lead generation, and marketing research. I respectfully pointed out that the tasks he described required an army of Marketing people, not a single person in charge of Marketing. It wasn’t a matter of credentials; it was a matter of expertise and experience: It’s hard for one person to know how to do everything well; a master of networking and branding may be entirely oblivious to research methods, and a competent researcher may be dreadful at writing newsletter columns. Isn’t it possible, however, to find someone who can really take on all of those tasks? It’s possible, but it’s not even that important. Here’s why:

It’s possible for you to shovel your driveway, mow your lawn, rake, clean, cook, paint—and more, all single-handedly. You may be good at all of it, yet sometimes you opt to hire a landscaper or a cleaning service, order a pizza, and have someone else paint your walls, because even with the experience and the expertise to do it all yourself, there are still only so many hours in a day. There comes a time when you just need a break, or you need to

concentrate on things you consider more pressing. You delegate; you contract out the tasks you can unload on someone else, and it's often someone with considerably greater experience and expertise in that particular task: You probably can't do landscaping work as well as a professional can—and you certainly can't do it as fast. If that's how you run your household, why should you run your hospice any differently?

Some of the smaller hospices have no staff at all with a Marketing background, while some of the larger ones may have entire Marketing departments. All of them need to perform some Marketing-related tasks related to branding, public relations, strategic marketing plans, fundraising, patient and family satisfaction research, employee satisfaction research, and others, that are vital to their success and quality of care; it's enough to overwhelm even a Marketing department. How can a hospice cope?

One way to cope is by trying things that seem to make sense, or attempting to do things on your own, in hopes of getting it right the first time and not having to pay the “terrific bills” often associated with gaining experience. It goes without saying that a great many students who opted to kick back the night before a chemistry test would be very relieved if hope alone turned out to be sufficient for success. Hope may spring eternal, but without experience and expertise to help fulfill it, it's an exercise in futility: Even effort is not enough; hard, vigorous work must be both longstanding and focused enough to build experience and expertise before it can produce the best results.

A more productive approach may be to seek out those with the experience and expertise to complement your staff. You don't need to put a dozen Marketing experts on salary, nor can you probably afford to, and it doesn't matter much. Even Fortune 500 companies with truly gigantic Marketing departments hire outside experts for such things as research, training, and strategic planning, because there are experts who possess specific skills or knowledge that even highly competent in-house employees do not. Hospices can do precisely the same: They can hire those experts on a per-project basis or on retainer or both, any of which is considerably less expensive than hiring them full-time. Better yet, your staff can learn from these experts and, after contracting a task out once or twice, can (omit)do subsequently perform it in-house for years to come. Hiring experts on retainer even allows you to have continuous access to them for matters large and small, and negotiate lower rates for special projects.

How you pick an expert is hardly a trivial matter. Hospice(s) beware: Everyone with a briefcase and a laptop can become a self-proclaimed expert. Sometimes you don't even need that much. A fancy title, say Hospice Consultants International, a barely literate cover letter and mediocre resume printed on a bad ink-jet printer, and lots of stamps is all it takes to reach a thousand hospices by mail and make a pitch as an authority on hospice Marketing. If just a couple of them hire you the effort has paid for itself, not to mention that you can now claim “experience” in Hospice Marketing regardless of how good a job you've done. Oh, I'm not being harsh; chances are you've seen the mailings yourself. Sometimes you can see right through them: If their own example of creative Marketing is sending wine and cheese baskets to referral sources, they've never heard of ethics violations or statutes regarding kick-backs. At times they're a little harder to judge, which is why it's a good idea to ask lots and lots of questions. An expert doesn't mind questions about his or her academic and professional credentials, breadth and depth of experience, or clients; an expert doesn't have a Ph.D. from a school that's not accredited or is accredited by Bob and Harry's Bowling and Business College. An expert is usually not very cheap, either. But when it comes to experience and expertise too, you get what you pay for. So ask questions, check references, and do a little research on the person you plan to assign your own research projects to.

What's the best way to find the best kind of expert—someone who has mastered the subject matter, has experience, but is also dependable, accessible, and trustworthy? Ask around; it beats doing a Google search or answering an unsolicited promotional pitch any day. Ask a colleague you know and trust for a referral; ask them to refer you to someone they have personally hired and were delighted with. That's what I do with everyone I hire myself, from a roofer to a web designer; I may end up paying a little more upfront, but I know it will be considerably cheaper than hiring the wrong person and getting lousy service or bad results.

Experts are an invaluable resource for your hospice, and hiring one (or more) is ultimately more cost effective than trying to do it all yourself. You have your brakes fixed by an auto mechanic, and you go to a dentist when you have a toothache—because they have the expertise and experience to provide better solutions than you can provide yourself. In your quest to be the very best hospice you can be don't just work hard, but work smart as well: Dedicate your own efforts to what you're truly passionate about, and what you excel in, and let the experts handle the rest.

(Note: It can be helpful to check with the HOPE office about possible experts and resources.)