

Marketing Matters



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The time when prospective hospice patients, their families, and ordinary people will all take the initiative to look into the details of hospice benefits, do research on available hospice providers in their area, and come knocking on your door will never come. The more thorough and sophisticated your public education and referral networking efforts are, the more likely they'll be to increase the level of awareness and knowledge about hospice in general and lead people to prefer your hospice over others. Still, patient and public access to information about hospice providers is about to increase by leaps and bounds, and in ways you may have never expected!

About a year and a half ago, *Marketing Matters* endorsed Hospice Analytics (hospiceanalytics.com), a company that analyzes Medicare data on hospice providers and patients. In fact, Hospice Analytics converts that data from convoluted meanders of numbers to user-friendly, easy-to-read color charts that require neither a Master's degree in Statistics nor the patience of a saint to decipher. Better yet, it's very recent data—less than a year old—and instead of just broad geographic analysis of generic information, the company actually yields specific information by provider and area, which means you can see the vital signs of every competitor in your county and surrounding counties no matter where you're located. They can also see yours, by the way; the number and profile of the people you serve, length of stay and diagnosis information, and much, much more—which means if you're not using the data but your competitors are, their decisions are more informed, targeted, and (from a competitive standpoint) more threatening to you. Why every hospice in the country isn't already using Hospice Analytics is a mystery to me, and when I talk about hospice in my graduate Healthcare Marketing course I always compare this to an army that saves money by giving its soldiers guns without ammunition: Both in a military and business context, it's a decision that's based on a cost analysis, not a cost/benefit analysis, and therefore likely to have dire consequences in the long run. I have no financial relationship whatsoever with Hospice Analytics—so the endorsement is as genuine as it is strong.

Now Hospice Analytics has launched a new service targeted to the general public: It's the National Hospice Locator, and (astoundingly) it's unique. One would have expected that NHPCO would have made available such a service years ago—but it only lists NHPCO members, which is sensible from a membership-building perspective, but not from a public service perspective. Almost all State hospice organization websites exclusively list member providers as well. But it's still hard to get more in-depth information than "what are the hospices in my area and how do I contact them?" The National Hospice Locator goes much further: Interested in just Medicare-certified hospices? Curious about what their accreditation is? What about specifically locating hospices with an inpatient unit without making half a dozen phone calls or looking at each hospice's website? Maybe the hospice's membership in its respective State organization or a national organization matters to people. Some may prefer a large or small hospice; a for-profit or nonprofit hospice; one affiliated with a hospital or a free-standing one—the list of search options is impressively long.

Yet this National Hospice Locator does much more than locating hospice providers. It also educates the public about all the options and differences between providers; it tells ordinary people that there are, in fact, for-profit and non-profit hospices, hospices with inpatient units and others without, hospices that vary in size, accreditation, affiliation, and more. These are factors that most people might've never known about, and therefore not considered in making a choice. The National Hospice Locator has the potential to change the way people choose hospices by changing the very factors they consider in making a decision.

There's more: As referral sources, buried in paperwork, pressed for time, stressed by legislative, regulatory, and other changes that affect their profession, look for ways to engage their patients more in decisions about their healthcare (that can make the doctor's job easier and the patient's experience more positive, by the way), they now have a tool they can guide patients and their families to. As awareness of the National Hospice Locator grows further, so may the tendency to refer patients to hospice in general without referring them to a particular hospice. This is a tool that would allow most people to explore options on their own—and their doctor may encourage them to do just that.

What does this all mean? For starters, it means that the organizations that were given the opportunity to sponsor the development of the National Hospice Locator won a Marketing lottery of sorts. Second, I predict that many other organizations will soon be advertising on the National Hospice Locator site (much like they advertise on Google Ads, though the added benefit on the Locator will be a considerably more captive audience). Third, when something is about to change the way your constituents (patients, families, doctors, nurses, clergy, the general public) learn about hospice options, and the way they make decisions on which provider to choose or refer people to, it should clearly catch your attention and be considered in the Marketing decisions your hospice makes. The proverbial ball is now decidedly in your court.