

# Marketing Matters

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Reactions to social media range from annoyance and horror to enthusiasm and passion. It's not a big surprise: People have different levels of technical competence and interest in technology. The former has more to do with being tech-savvy and knowledgeable/skilled at using technology, and the latter with how much cares about it in the first place—but one clearly affects the other. Some consider email and internet browsing to be useful, but adequate—and social media is often seen as a black hole that can absorb vast amounts of valuable time and energy. Others think that social media present an exciting opportunity to reach out to people, stay connected with them, and communicate with them frequently and efficiently. Whichever camp you're in, you're right.

If the facebook phenomenon started as a purely social platform for college students, it certainly isn't that any more. Not only has it grown to transcend all age groups and education levels, but it has become an organizational tool as well. Companies are even offering people incentives to "be liked" on facebook so they can have access to those people (and an awful lot of personal and lifestyle information about them) for marketing purposes. They use facebook and Twitter and other platforms to publicize special events, maintain top-of-mind awareness, strengthen their brand, and establish relationships with those they currently serve or aspire to serve. And so should you.

Hospices should see social media as a marketing opportunity; one that is particularly effective and very inexpensive. This could easily play a supporting role in fundraising, volunteer recruitment and retention, education efforts, and even referral generation. It would be an important role under any circumstances, but an essential one in highly competitive areas. At a time of crisis, you can rally supporters to come to the rescue (financially or otherwise); you can present your side of the story in cases of negative media attention; you can create enthusiasm about a new initiative you're launching; you can increase attendance at a public event you're hosting or participating in; you can reach out to sources of invaluable testimonials. On an ongoing basis you can maintain a presence that makes you more

relevant, more appreciated, more valuable to your core supporters and the community at large.

Other social media, like LinkedIn, have a considerably narrower (but also more focused) reach, and allow for more in-depth and meaningful interactions. LinkedIn is already being used to recruit hospice staff (perhaps recruit them away from *your* hospice), sometimes by professional hospice recruiters—and it also makes it very easy to connect to other hospice professionals both individually and through group forums (like LinkedIn’s Hospice Advocacy Group) to discuss issues, share best practices, and more. It also allows you to keep an eye on your competitors on a more consistent, less time-consuming way. LinkedIn presents the unique opportunity to engage a great many of your staff in social media efforts; unlike facebook or Twitter where one or two people may manage your hospice’s “official outreach” to the public in a highly centralized manner, LinkedIn is almost always person-specific, and its outreach comes from individuals, not from an organization as a whole. If it seems less cohesive, it’s because it can be—but it doesn’t *have* to be unless your staff is not on the same page about what your hospice brand and strategic direction are (and if that’s the case, LinkedIn is the least of your worries). The upside is that LinkedIn allows you to take several bites at the apple, and when used effectively, it offers the opportunity to have several ambassadors represent your hospice at the same time.

Some social media are very labor-intensive; facebook and Twitter, for instance, require constant monitoring and engagement; daily updates (often multiple daily updates) are commonplace. Assigning them to someone as a chore is a veritable recipe for failure, since they require someone truly passionate to administer them effectively. Hopefully it’s also someone very comfortable with technology, great written communication skills, some knowledge of PR, and an in-depth awareness of your hospice’s brand. Ensuring continuity is also another consideration; if losing your only social media guru means losing your social media presence altogether, maybe you need more than one guru. Keep in mind, however, that not all social media require that constant level of attention and updates; LinkedIn is certainly not as time-demanding, but although its benefits are very important, they are different than those of facebook and Twitter.

A major concern regarding social media is the “uncontrollable” factor. What if someone has terrible things to say about your hospice, and a forum to do it in? But chances are someone who intends to make negative comments about your hospice and post them for the word to see, they will no matter what; you can’t, in fact, control it. But wouldn’t it be great if you had an entire community of supporters already poised and eager to respond to the detractor in real time? You may not be able to control social media, but you can definitely manage it with the same skill, dexterity, and creativity that you can manage traditional media; perhaps considerably more. If you don’t have a social media presence, there’s a gap in your marketing efforts. Fill it soon, lest a competitor do it for you.