

Marketing Matters

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There are many factors that affect the success of your Marketing efforts, and one of those is the implementation of your Strategic Plan. Your entire Marketing Plan ought to be aligned with your hospice's Strategic Plan to begin with: It ought to take into account your hospice's Mission, Vision, Values, Driving Force, and organization-wide SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats), and actively contribute to the fulfillment of your Strategic Objectives. So why do Strategic Plans sometimes end up being utterly useless, taking up space in a corner? Why do some hospices only dust off the last Strategic Plan when it's time to write another one five years down the road?

One problem is that Strategic Plans are created in a vacuum: The Plan is sometimes developed by people who have extensive management experience but no specific expertise in Strategic Planning. This scenario can result in a Strategic Plan full of biases, since people inside the organization often find it hard to step back and look at the big picture with the broad, untainted perspective of a third-party observer. The SWOT analysis is usually a first casualty, and the Strategic Objectives suffer directly as a result. Alternatively, the Plan is created by a senior leadership team and presented to the entire staff as a fait accompli. It is then subject to the "not invented here" syndrome; people perceive it as the product of a non-inclusive process that is simply imposed from the top down, and resist it as a result. Even if the Plan is good, it's unlikely to be effective under those circumstances.

Unlike a Marketing Plan, a Strategic Plan can't just be created by an executive team or the board, even with the assistance of an expert. It needs to be the product of an inclusive process that involves everyone on staff—which is entirely feasible, by the way, even for large hospices with hundreds of employees. There are ways to accomplish it even without time-consuming and expensive full-day staff retreats, but accomplishing it is essential. If you already work with an outside Marketing expert, chances are they can help you do this, or recommend someone who can.

Even an excellent Strategic Plan needs to be marketed. Yes, it's time to stop thinking of Marketing as just an external function; something that targets people in the community, prospective donors, volunteers, referral sources, and more. Just as you use Marketing to raise awareness, build support, and create goodwill among external constituents, you can use it internally to do the very same things among your own staff! Internal Marketing is crucial to establishing open channels of communication between departments and individuals, disseminating information, soliciting feedback, and ensuring the services you provide are offered consistently. It's

also essential to making sure there's buy-in—and, ideally, enthusiasm—about your Strategic Plan across all levels of your organization!

If you do that successfully, there are some other possible inhibitors to your Strategic Plan's implementation: Sometimes the demands of existing tasks, from special projects right down to the daily routine, interfere with the ability to focus on the Plan. Aversion to change is another problem; too frequently people in an organization are comfortable with the status quo and apprehensive about new initiatives of any kind. Unexpected changes, be it new opportunities or new threats, can also distract from the Strategic Plan's implementation. Sometimes the senior leadership itself doesn't make it a point to follow through on the Strategic Objectives.

None of these are pitfalls that can't be avoided. The need to adjust elements of a Strategic Plan in the face of contingencies is hardly a valid excuse for abandoning its implementation altogether. Sometimes the timeline set for meeting specific Strategic Objectives may need to be altered, and the composition of the team responsible for accomplishing them may change. Yet surely we've all had to take an unexpected detour that took us off a familiar road at some point in time: That didn't make us abandon the destination, make a U-turn and head for home; we may have taken a slightly different way, but still got to where we were headed in the first place! As for overcoming aversion to change and lack of follow-up, it's something that can definitely be accomplished with strong leadership, thoughtful, compelling communication, and the unshakable belief in the need to make better strategic decisions. Being flexible, persistent and responsive is the way to make sure your Strategic Plan is implemented!

It needs to be clear to all, from the Executive Director to the newest intern and everyone in between, that the successful implementation of your Strategic Plan will not just benefit "your hospice" in an abstract sense, but specifically each and every person in your organization—clinical or administrative, new or seasoned, high ranking or up-and-coming. Just as importantly, it will benefit every current and future patient in your care, and those patients' families, thanks to a hospice that's stronger, better, with a broader reach and a reputation for warmth and compassion. The potential benefits are very high for everyone involved, and making sure that everyone understands and embraces the importance of this effort is something you can't afford to neglect.

Without the successful implementation of your Strategic Plan, it will be difficult to be strategic in anything you do—including Marketing efforts. Everything you do, from launching ambitious new initiatives to making day-to-day decisions, is part of a system, and should all fit under a strategic umbrella. Strategic thinking is going to be the foundation that makes your Marketing efforts world-class in design, execution, and effectiveness. And that's a promise!