



Marketing Matters

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Professor Moses Altsech, Ph.D.
President, Executive Training & Consulting
<http://www.callmoses.com>; (608) 213-4110

With just a little imagination, suppose for a moment you're the Captain of a schooner, steering your ship in rough seas. There may be bigger ships than yours, but you have a hard-working crew and direly-needed cargo, and you're determined to weather the storm. There's just one problem: You have no map. You can get by on low provisions, you can keep the sails up, and the deckhands can work harder to deal with the waves—but without a map, what good is any of it? Other ships with charts on board will always beat you to the destination and people will start going to them first; eventually they'll take over your route, and you'll go out of business. Pirates may or may not have spotted you yet, but their very purpose is to hunt for ships like yours; ships that sail about without maps, looking half-lost: Sooner or later they'll find you like sharks that smell blood, and everything you worked so hard to build will just become another day's plunder. Worse yet, your ship may well run aground—or strike a reef and sink, turning what is today a proud vessel into floating debris. In the meantime, the storm isn't going anywhere.

Luckily for you, there's a "deus ex machina" built into the story: One of the passengers turns out to be an experienced mapmaker. Has the day been saved? Don't ask me; you're the Captain. Are you planning to buy a map? I suppose you could take the time to haggle over the price. Maybe you could think about it for a while? Oh, I know: You could wait until the next meeting of the shipping company's board, and do whatever *they* think you should do (even though some of them have never spent a day at sea.) You can always just figure you don't need a map; you haven't wrecked the ship so far, so you'll keep taking your chances. What's it going to be, Captain?

No, it's not some far-fetched analogy. You—or someone you know—really IS a Captain, in charge of a hospice that's sailing through rough seas. Some of you have already seen competitors around you, and others are going to before too long. Your resources are scarce, your staff dedicated, and the hardships are only going to get bigger. There are challenges you've already identified (but are unsure how to deal with), and others that aren't even on your radar screen quite yet. Luckily for you, there's a "deus ex machina" built into the story: It's called a Strategic Marketing Plan. Too many hospices don't have one, and too many hospices don't know the first thing about creating one. But Marketing matters, and you're one decision away from getting your own Marketing Plan. Go ahead and haggle. Go ahead and wing it. Go ahead and wait. You'll be hurting someone all right, and it won't be your competitors. You're the Captain: You get to decide.

A Strategic Marketing Plan will allow you to do many critical things: It will give you insight into who you are; what you're good at and what you should improve on. It will help you get a clearer view of the threats you face, but also help you realize that when it comes to Marketing every cloud really does have a silver lining. The Plan will let you know who your competitors—present and future—are going to be, and that's the first step towards figuring how to deal with them. It will give you a roadmap on how to raise awareness about hospice (and your hospice in particular), how to build stronger referrals, how to invest your scarce resources in a more purposeful way, how to build and retain a world-class staff, how to improve the quality of care that you provide to patients and their families, how to be better, more nimble, more creative, more responsive, more deliberate. This is not even an all-inclusive list, but I get to write a column, not another doctoral dissertation (one was enough for me!) Clearly, as maps go, a Strategic Marketing Plan is not simply one worth having, but a must-have tool.

For anyone who ever heard stories of a Marketing Plan that wasn't worth the paper it was printed on, I'm with you: I've heard the stories too, and seen those kinds of "plans." There are good mechanics and bad mechanics; competent and incompetent chefs; skilled and unskilled painters. Sometimes you just get what you pay for. It helps to check references, and it's important to ask tough questions about their credentials. If you get a sorcerer's apprentice to develop your Marketing Plan, no wonder you end up with a tool you can't use.

Note that I called it a tool: That means you can use it well, use it poorly, or not use it at all. Developing a Strategic Marketing Plan is not supposed to be like making a painting (though I dare say that there's both art and science that go into creating a Marketing Plan that truly is strategic). A painting is something you finish, hang on the wall, and look at. It's pretty, it gives you a sense of accomplishment, and it feels good to look at. A Strategic Marketing Plan sitting in a drawer is just taking up space—and you should've saved the time and money it took to create. If you're going to make one, you might as well use it—and use it well: Implementing a Strategic Marketing Plan is just as important as having one in the first place. If you did have the foresight to create one—to give yourself the map you need to navigate through stormy seas—you should use it decisively, consistently, and accurately. If you don't have the time or know-how to do that, hire someone to do it for you, possibly on a fixed-time retainer. You only get to revisit the plan—re-examine and update it—roughly every five years, though dramatic, unanticipated changes in the environment may require interim adjustments. A Marketing Plan is not cast in stone; it's a living document, and should be treated as such. At least take comfort in that revising or updating a plan is not the same as re-inventing the wheel. As long as you start with a strong foundation, all future buildings projects become much easier.

What does a Strategic Marketing Plan guarantee? It doesn't guarantee making the right decisions all the time—but it guarantees making more right decisions and making them considerably more often than you would if you didn't have a plan. In short, you can get lost with a map too; it's just a lot less likely.

Why on earth, then, doesn't every hospice have one? I have no idea. Oh, no; please don't bring up cost, and going through hard times, and having to be conservative, and having to save money. Ask the Captain who's clinging on to a wooden plank, floating mid-ocean, watching the schooner's stern go under the waves, whether he or she would trade getting the ship back for the price of a map. I bet I can guess the answer 100% of the time—but the problem is you can never turn back time. Some things are luxuries and some things are necessities: There's a reason you don't try to save money by skipping a by-pass operation (or shopping around for the cheapest rather than the best surgeon). It's the same reason you don't try to save money on the tools that can keep your hospice competitive, the quality of your care high, your staff retention and yours referrals strong, even through hard times. There's no excuse for not having a Strategic Marketing Plan; strong leadership and strategic thinking.

If you already have one, it's up to date, and it guides your hospice's Marketing, give yourself a well-deserved pat on the back. If you don't, I think I may have just given you a new challenge to tackle: Rest assured that it's a very worthwhile challenge. Not only will the outcome make you shine, but your staff, your patients, and their families will all be better off as a result.