

Executive Survival Guide

Practical advice to help you deal with **your** everyday **realities**

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PUBLIC RELATIONS

Taking Your Story National

Tips for getting your message out beyond the local reporters and avoiding the hidden dangers of visibility.

All healthcare is local, or so the saying goes. But that concept may not apply to marketing the message anymore. Health plans are becoming national and regional. Hospitals and health systems continue to look past their city limits for new opportunities to attract patients. Part of the goal of gaining that wider audience is to achieve a broader, even national, reputation.

And it's not just patients who may want to see where your hospital stacks up in the regional or national market. Prospective physicians, nurses and other caregivers may be analyzing your healthcare organization from a distance. "A national reputation makes you top of mind in many markets, especially your local market," Susan Solomon, vice president of marketing for MemorialCare, a five-hospital system based in Long Beach, Calif.

Getting your message out to a larger audience requires some rethinking, but here are some tips from the experts:

1. Have a point

No volume of e-mail blast or slick mailings will resonate unless there is a unique message behind what your hospital is doing. In many cases, community and rural hospitals may find they are competing with more media-savvy university-based institutions, says Anthony Cirillo, president of Fast Forward Strategic Planning and Marketing Consulting, LLC in Huntersville, N.C. "You really have to go back to your goal, hone in on it and niche yourself to start making inroads," he says.

MemorialCare started developing an identity built around best practices 10 years ago. "We have been able to accomplish a lot of recognition because we have a very clear brand identity, and that is the quality story," Solomon says. "We have focused most of our marketing and public relations around that message. The story has gotten out way beyond our community."

2. Have an evangelist

Journalists will look for someone at the senior level of the hospital who can enthusiastically articulate the message. Solomon says she is fortunate to have CEO Barry Arbuckle, Ph.D., as a passionate spokesman for MemorialCare, but she emphasizes that it does not have to be the CEO.

"A spokesperson can be a physician or anyone else who speaks from authority," Solomon says. "It can be anyone in the organization who knows the story."

3. Win something

Pensacola, Fla.-based Baptist Health Care has received the trophies for "100 Best Companies To Work For" from *FORTUNE* and "100 Top Cardiovascular Hospitals" from Solucient. After all, says Pam Bilbrey, president of the Baptist Healthcare Leadership Institute that is part of the system's for-profit arm, "everybody wants to be friends with a winner." It can boost your market share for one. It's also a boon to employee pride. Before the news goes out to the market, Baptist mounts internal education campaigns so employees understand what the recognition means, making them informed advocates in the community. Board members are given pocket briefing guides that provide bullet details about the honor. In the case of nonprofits, the pride may swell over to donors and boost contribution levels. Baptist has seen its opportunities for community partnerships grow with its reputation.

Winning awards is not simple business. It requires a cultural, long-standing commitment to excellence in patient care, employee satisfaction or a host of other measures that are not easily obtained. But if the commitment already exists in a particular area, the natural extension is to seek recognition of that commitment. If awards come, they can be leveraged in many ways, including Web sites, promotional campaigns, even streaming video in the hospital.

4. Pick an issue

It's not necessary to win a national award to get some national media attention. When looking at the strategy and tactics of going national, Joy Scott, president of Canoga Park, Calif.-based Scott Public Relations, says it's good to go after the key issues getting attention in society and from news media, like patient safety, caring for older Americans and the uninsured or disaster preparedness. Issues that are the most significant and affect the most people may give you the most leverage if you can translate what you're doing into a positive for the greater good, she says.

5. Beware of the spotlight

"When you raise your head up, you potentially become more of a lightning rod should something go wrong," says Scott. If a hospital is known nationally for a certain program and something happens in that field, whether it's positive or negative, you may be contacted, she says. If a new piece of technology is introduced, the media might seek out your opinion on it. On the other hand, if a piece of technology is recalled, you might be asked about what you're planning to do.

6. Don't bore reporters

Be very careful before you remind a national or local healthcare journalist that it is National Heart or Lung or Liver Month. Solomon says her hospital brings in a handful of journalists once a year to talk to the marketing and public relations staff.

"We sit down with them and we are very frank with them. We ask, 'What is of interest to you?' Sometimes they will even say, 'Hey, I received this press release from you guys and I was bored with it.'"

-- Jim Molpus and Kara Olsen