

**When Community Hospitals Ail, An Infusion
of Marketing Speeds Recovery
by David Brimm, BrimmComm, Inc.**

Writing in *Vital Signs*, a publication produced by the Massachusetts Medical emergency room visit to a community hospital: Society On Line, Charles A. Welch, M.D. noted the following in reference to an emergency room visit to a community hospital:

“It was everything one could hope for in a community hospital: friendly, competent, expedient, convenient and user-friendly. The experience was an important reminder of what treasures we have in our community hospitals. These hospitals, the products of generations of public stewardship and generosity, are the indispensable foundation of our health care system. They embody the familiar dictum: the right care at the right time in the right setting -- and they do it with compassion and competence.

Unfortunately, the existence of these hospitals is threatened as never before. They labor under inadequate reimbursement, the rising costs of delivering care, burdensome overhead expenses, a severe shortage of nurses and physicians, and a growing number of patients who are neither insured nor in the free care pool. Many of these hospitals are chronically on the brink of financial failure through no fault of their own, but they continue to deliver the best care possible.”

The Best Kept Secret

In just two paragraphs, Dr. Welch does a pretty good job summing up the state of community hospitals in the U.S. In particular, his assessment that community hospitals deliver “the best care possible.” What is missing from his assessment is that in general, community hospitals don’t always do a particularly good job reminding patients, staff, other physicians, insurers and community leaders about the important role they play in healthcare. The missing dimension is the need for community hospitals to do a better job defining their image and reinforcing all that they bring to the health and vitality of the community. In short: the under-utilization of marketing to help shape a community hospital’s reputation, and ultimately, their financial future.

We have been working with Paris Community Hospital, a 29-bed community hospital in Paris, Illinois on an ambitious identity program to better define their image in the community. It also addresses concerns that the local patient base, and even staff and physicians in the area, are not aware of the complete array of services that the hospital provides. Working with the hospital’s internal marketing manager, BrimmComm, has helped direct a comprehensive marketing and PR support program.

The first step was to retire the hospital’s dated logo and image materials, which didn’t convey the modern image of the hospital or reflect its range of patient services. This logo quickly captured the spirit of a revitalized community hospital and became an integral part of the marketing program.

Leveraging The Internet

Another major initiative was to update the hospital's web site. With increasing regularity, consumers rely on the Internet for health care information. An interactive, inviting web site is often the first perception a patient or physician has of a medical facility.

Washington State University recently reported that libraries in seven community hospitals in the Northwest have recently connected to the Internet as part of a project carried out by the Regional Medical Library at the University of Washington. The project is called "From Bench to Bedside: Research and Testing of Internet Resources and Connections in Community Hospital Libraries."

"There are many unknowns relating to the implementation of networked resources and services in community hospitals," says Neil Rambo, Associate Director of the National Network of Libraries of Medicine, Pacific Northwest Region. "Through this project we are exploring optimal technical, financial, and user models for extending access. We hope this project will be the first phase of an on-going effort to extend network access throughout the region."

Recognizing the importance of the web site, Paris Community Hospital's site now has become a vital source of healthcare information with by-lined features by on-staff physicians, it allows patients to sign up for medical tests on line, provides updated outpatient services and special health events, and is used to post job openings and allow for on-line applications. In just a few months, the visits to the hospital web site have doubled, and the duration of each visit is lengthening, reflecting the vitality of the site.

Becoming The Community Health Care Information Source

One of the key strategies employed for Paris Community Hospital, and adopted by others, is to transform the hospital from strictly a site to go to when you're sick or require a test, to a community resource that partners with the community to educate them about ways to stay healthy. It starts with health fairs and other patient outreach programs, but should also be combined with aggressive marketing tactics, including advertising and public relations.

Working with BrimmComm, Paris Community Hospital re-evaluated its advertising strategy, moving from small, periodic ads in the local newspaper promoting an event or physician, to an impactful full-page monthly color insert entitled "Staying Healthy." With a bold design that employed the new logo, *Staying Healthy* emphasized a major theme (cancer awareness, diabetes, etc.) that was complemented by physician by-lines that helped give visibility to the medical staff while also reinforcing certain expertise in treatment and diagnostics. This was supported by a calendar of events and short items relating to preventive care. To give the insert greater distribution, it was posted on the hospital's website.

The hospital's public relations program was also evaluated. Short news items were replaced with more in-depth educational features that tied back to the hospital's services and educated readers about preventive health. Releases also showcased new equipment and physicians.

An Investment In Future Growth

Chances are that most community hospitals have set aside limited resources for marketing because marketing is not perceived as an investment that impacts the bottom line. This assessment would be wrong, if one considers the direct and indirect revenue generated by marketing such as building outpatient revenue through greater recruitment of patients, more referrals from local physicians unaware of the full range of the hospital's services, and increasing enrollment in hospital-sponsored fee-based educational programs for smoking cessation and weight control. Also factored in should be the benefits attained by helping physician recruitment and staff morale.

If a hospital does not have in-house marketing capabilities, it can be cost effective to bring in an outside marketing firm that can in essence become the hospital's marketing department. Tapping into their unique skills, they can manage the entire program, freeing up time for supervisory personnel who can oversee the activities. If an in-house marketing function exists, an outside firm can work with on-staff marketing/development personnel to upgrade skills and add new dimensions to the range of marketing capabilities.

Progressive community hospitals today need to create a niche for themselves and seek ways to become a more vital part of the community health network. Marketing is a key to helping community hospitals identify new revenue streams and to compete in an the ever-challenging healthcare landscape.