

A Basic Marketing Communications Approach Brings Dividends for Small, Progressive Rural Hospital

by David Brimm

In many small rural areas, the community hospital is the primary health and medical resource, but that doesn't always mean that residents are familiar with the hospital's capability to provide a variety of services. Recognizing that informed community members avail themselves more frequently of the local hospital's services, Paris Community Hospital and its associated Family Medical Center clinics, or PCH/FMC, in east central Illinois embarked on a comprehensive marketing communications effort.

Despite being a small rural hospital with 25 licensed beds, Paris Community invested heavily in diagnostic equipment and a growing physician staff to become a full service provider. Its services include emergency medicine, surgery, family medicine, pediatrics, internal medicine, physical therapy, cardiac rehabilitation, radiology, and psychology. The hospital's vice president of business development, Richard Ueberfluss, recognized that the facility needed to ensure that its investments were recognized by the community and supported by an increase in inpatient and outpatient revenue.

"We realized that we needed to expand our marketing communications program and devote some financial resources to bring in a professional marketing firm that could provide us with expertise and an external perspective. This would give us the resources we needed without putting more pressure on our already limited management time," says Ueberfluss. Paris Community retained BrimmComm, a Chicago-based firm to assist with implementation of the strategic plan.

Graphics and Web site redo

Under Ueberfluss' direction, BrimmComm's first initiative was to upgrade the graphic image of the hospital. It had been using a maroon and dark blue logo with a white cross that didn't work well when reproduced in black and white or online. Importantly, the logo didn't instill perceptions of a technologically advanced hospital and medical center. The organization wanted to retain some of the old logo's heritage in a more contemporary version and communicate a unified hospital and three rural health clinics. The new logo retained the cross, gave it a high-tech look and a bold color, and presented PCH/FMC with the image it needed.

Most importantly, a theme line was developed in conjunction with the logo to reinforce the organization's guiding principles: "Committed to Community and Family Health." The theme line captured PCH/FMC's approach to health care and its nearly 35 years of commitment to local residents.

The next requirement was to upgrade the hospital's Web site, which was not maximizing its usefulness as an information tool. New navigational aids and graphics were added to

reinforce expanded education-oriented content. The content gave users a real appreciation for the variety of services that PCH/FMC provides to the community. In addition to specific information about the hospital, content included general preventative health information related to PCH/FMC's core services.

The next key project was to create a unified graphics look for all written materials, including ads, newsletters, and a newly created monthly newspaper insert entitled "Staying Healthy." Resembling a two-page glossy newsletter with bold, large photos, the insert stands out from the newspaper's regular editorial content. "Staying Healthy" offers readers a perspective on the vital health issues of the day and links health concerns with PCH/FMC physicians and programs. Whenever possible, PCH/FMC physicians are showcased as experts in print publications and as speakers on relevant health concerns at community events.

Stemming outmigration

A priority of the marketing communications program was to leverage PCH/FMC's medical staff, diagnostic equipment, and building renovation and expansion projects to discourage consumers from traveling to competing hospitals for services that they could access closer to home.

"We knew we were losing patients to other hospitals not because of a quality issue, but because they did not know we offered these services, says Ueberfluss. "We believed that if patients knew they could receive services from PCH, such as MRIs, cardiac care, surgical services, and emergency services, we would benefit. So our outreach program changed perceptions among patients and among physicians not affiliated with our hospital, who began using PCH for diagnostic testing and treatment."

Great results

Since the marketing effort began in late 2002, outpatient revenue has grown by 45.8 percent, MRIs by 16.2 percent; and cardiac stress test volumes, by 38.1 percent.

The number of patients seeking outpatient care has increased by almost 12.4 percent. Combined revenue for both PCH and FMC has risen by 33.1 percent, the majority of which was reinvested in the hospital.

The program continues to find new opportunities for community education. An annual report recaps medical and financial achievements during the previous year. A new physician directory that will further reinforce the depth of the PCH/FMC medical staff is under way.

"One of the dividends of our ... marketing effort is that it has instilled new pride in the community regarding the exceptional level of care we can provide. Equally important, the program has instilled renewed pride among our staff, visiting physicians, and energized our donor base," says Ueberfluss.

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