

Communications Are Essential In The Health Care Arena

The days of health care services being a private affair are as gone as the days when towns had three attorneys and six ice cream parlors. In those days, one's trusted physician or health care provider and especially the quality of the services rendered was largely considered above scrutiny and discussion distasteful. These days, the health care industry is one of the most regulated, litigated, and debated elements in the service industry. How did public perception change so drastically? Staggering court sanctions against providers, highly publicized medical mistakes, the public's ongoing fascination with sensational stories, increased unionization of health care workers, the public's predisposition to distrust for-profit health care providers and HMOs, and enhanced regulatory oversight have all contributed to this shift. These dynamics coupled with a perception of arrogance, profiteering and secrecy by health care providers not surprisingly have led the industry to where it is today—one highly sensitive to public perception.



With A Vision
Mary Phillips

The Importance of the Message: When it comes to hospitals, pharmacies and nursing homes, a facility's credibility largely determines its market share and viability. To succeed in today's competitive marketplace, the delivery of quality, compassionate care is essential. But that alone is not enough.

Developing the organization's corporate values and vision, properly delivering that message to a variety of internal and external audiences, communicating the difference between you and the competition, and positioning yourself to effectively respond when things go awry will be the ultimate determinant of long-term success.

Strategic Communication: How well a health care provider responds to issues—and how the public perceives the response—helps determine a facility's reputation, continued referrals, future admission, the scope of government investigations, the facility's susceptibility to lawsuits, even employee recruitment and retention. There should be a communications plan for an organization. First, review the corporate vision; second, write the message reflective of that vision; third, develop the communications campaign strategy; fourth, the message is delivered by a trained spokesperson; and fifth, assess and evaluate the success of the communications campaign.

Prior to a crisis: Have a communications plan developed by a professional. Designate and have a trained internal spokesperson or utilize outside expertise. Develop the corporate message of caring, professional health care delivery. Consistently communicate the quality-of-care message internally and external-

ly. Review all corporate communiqués (Web sites, invoices, memos, policy manual, advertisements, forms, etc.) for message consistency. Promote the positive or "hitchhike" on related positive news stories to develop credibility and public awareness.

Crisis Communication: Crisis communications occur in the response to real or perceived abuse, neglect or exploitation of patients or services. Recall recent health-related headlines: incorrect laboratory results; diluting pharmaceuticals; deaths from overheating in nursing home; maggots in patients; suspicious deaths possibly linked to staff; and the list goes on and on.

During a crisis:

- Develop a crisis communication team that includes the CEO and a media trained-spokesperson.
- Be compassionate.
- Review the facts.
- Develop the foundation of the message and control the dialogue.
- Decide on the appropriate spokesperson.
- Deliver a targeted and truthful message.
- Be sensitive to the public's shifting perception of the issue.
- Evaluate the organization's vulnerabilities during and after the crisis.

As important as knowing what to do in a crisis is knowing what *not* to do. Do not:

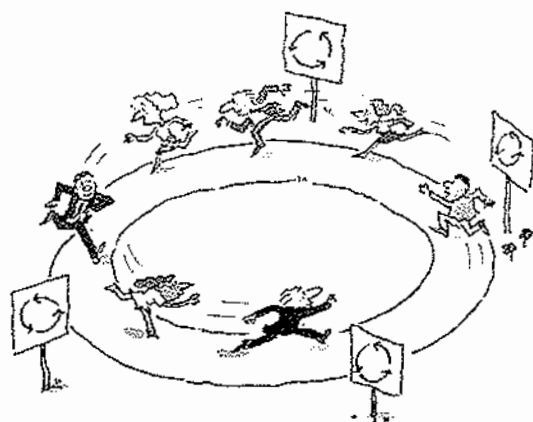
- Say "no comment."
- Throw your hand up in front of the camera, chances are the tape is already rolling. It is too tempting as visual footage on television.
- Be caught off guard—have your crisis communication team in place.
- Have the wrong spokesperson deliver the message. In some instances, the CEO delivers the most credible statement and at other times it is important to insulate the CEO or organization and utilize an outside spokesperson.
- Fail to publicly show compassion.
- Believe that the company is too big or credible to suffer in the public eye. Recall the Red Cross fundraising debacle after 9/11?
- Think you will have plenty of time to respond once the crisis hits.
- Lie.

At a minimum, every health care organization should have a crisis communication plan in place and a media-trained staff or external spokesperson. As I tell my health care clients, *while it is impossible to plan the timing of a crisis, it is possible to plan the handling of a crisis.*

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HEALTH CARE SPECIAL SECTION

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