This special report has been prepared by the hospice letter editorial team. We have been trusted to serve the hospice community of professionals since 1979. We pay special tribute to the veteran hospice administrators, directors and professionals who freely offered their insight and advice that has been included in this special report.

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How to Market Your Hospice: Proven, Practical Strategies and Tactics That Work Best

The need for active marketing of hospice and palliative care is crucial. Many hospices have very small budgets and rely heavily on Medicare payments, fundraising, charitable donations and grant funding.

Although the hospice community has come forward in recent years with marketing efforts, more needs to be done, according to industry officials.

This special report by the hospice letter editors takes the reasonable, practical and ‘doable’ marketing strategies and tactics that veteran hospice professionals have shared with us based on their experiences and results.

When it comes to marketing hospice, “don’t reinvent the wheel,” advises Rachel Schmidt of the American Hospice Foundation.

Schmidt said keep marketing simple and take the time to target your audience, she told an audience during a conference sponsored by the New Jersey Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.

“Your biggest customers are not people who are sick,” said Schmidt. “They are caregivers.”

Utilize local churches as a marketing tool, advertise in bulletins, ask staff members who are parishioners to help out, said Schmidt.

By educating people in one’s own community, it is much easier to get the word out than some place where no one knows your organization, according to Schmidt.

Marketing hospice requires time and attention, but this will make it grow, said Schmidt.

Another possibility is to partner with community businesses, according to Schmidt. This will offer a whole new market of customers.

To improve the amount of nursing home referrals for hospice, speak to family members. Introduce events such as Family Counsel Night where information on hospice can be provided, said Schmidt.

“Forget what you know” about hospice marketing, said Schmidt. “Be enthusiastic, be passionate and empower the consumer.”
Increasing Physician Hospice Referrals: Marketing and Outreach Strategies That Work Best

Working to maximize physician referrals to your hospice is perhaps one of the most productive marketing activities you can undertake.

To increase physician referrals, many hospice organizations have implemented outreach and marketing strategies and have identified which methods work best in a recent Hospice Management Leadership Survey.

The exclusive online survey was conducted by the editorial staff of hospice letter and collected information on issues surrounding physician referrals including outreach methods, how to increase awareness of hospice in the healthcare field and lengths of stay.

Arranging office visits, offering educational sessions and hosting special events are among the most common methods used when marketing hospice to physicians, according to survey respondents.

**Offering CMEs**

Earning continuing medical education (CME) credit is one way to entice physicians to attend a learning session about hospice, according to one organization president and CEO.

“Education sessions with CMEs (work best), because they can get credit for it as well as learn something,” the respondent said.

Lori Schiller, clinical director at Hospice of Little Traverse Bay, said “one hour education rounds related to pain management,” also work best. At these education events, physicians can earn CMEs and food is provided.

**Office Visits and Personal Contact**

Personal, one-on-one visits work the best for many other organizations, according to the survey.

“Face to face” meetings are probably the most effective outreach method for VNA Care Hospice, according to the organization’s Vice President and hospice letter editorial advisor Mary G. Whalen.
“The best marketing is done by the provision of quality care to their patients and to have families who share their satisfaction of hospice with their physicians,” she said. “This will prompt the physician to re-refer.”

What works best for another president responding to the survey is “information visits to each office with both physician and staff — usually at lunch. A physician often leaves the hospice decision to his/her office staff.”

“Leaving information for the doctors to read” during office visits has proven to be a successful marketing strategy, according to another executive director.

Personal contacts work “because we can explain our services and philosophy,” noted an executive from Equinox Lifecare Solutions.

**Hosting Events**

According to a hospice coordinator, “having hospice fundraisers and inviting physicians” is the outreach method that works best.

**Best Practices in Hospice Marketing**

Marketing is an integral part of increasing referrals and use of hospice services, and with competition from other hospices and markets creating a squeeze, an organization needs to identify best practices for the community being served.


To start, a hospice should target a specific audience down to the subsets of types of patients, types of referral sources, settings and venues of service. A hospice must then “analyze each one of them because each one of those segments has different dynamics and they have different needs,” Ferris said.

“The only way that we’re going to position ourselves as being the preferable choice, the logical choice for those specific patients is to make sure that we’ve crafted our message and our program to deliver on those specific needs,” he added.

Once the markets have been identified, you must analyze each market as well as the segments of your referral sources, he said.
Budgeting is the next step, Ferris said. “We’ve got to make sure that we have a precise budget and that budget is developed based on our marketing plan, not the other way around.”

Because hospice budgets tend to be smaller than other industries, it is vital to focus the dollars and know where business is driven from to weed out strategies that are not working.

“You’ve got to track your results and know what is providing the return on investment,” Ferris said. “And then the stuff that’s working, leverage it, and look for every way that we can get more out of it and keep doing it and if there’s things that are not generating the return, those are the ones that you probably want to phase out.”

Differentiating your organization from the rest is the next task. The hospice needs to identify:

- How the program is different;
- How it will benefit the referral source; and
- How to translate the connection into long-term, solid relationships.

Part of the process for seeking out the answers is by asking “probing questions,” Ferris said. Staff asking the questions must also listen carefully and have patience and persistence.

“And you want to ask questions that are typically open-ended: tell me about; what does this mean to you; how does this impact your practice,” Ferris explained.

Don’t, however, allow yourself or your team members to jump into selling something to the person being questioned.

“You’re probing for needs, you’re asking good questions, you’re asking further probing questions to find out at the end of the day what is important to them,” he said.

Awareness of Strengths and Weaknesses Can Improve Hospice Marketing Efforts

Who are you? What words identify your hospice’s services and goals? What strengths does your organization possess that makes it stand above the rest? Knowing the answers to these questions can help a hospice deliver more effective marketing.
Mary Lou Dahms, director of marketing and public relations at Hospice of the Red River Valley, explained how word association exercises can help hospices to identify and build upon strengths during “Successful Hospice Marketing Methods,” an audio conference sponsored by hospice letter.

Building on strengths and sharing them with the community through marketing can help attract more patients and families to your services, Dahms noted.

**Word Association**

Spending a mere 15 minutes with staff, volunteers and board members and asking them to throw out words and phrases that come to their mind when they think of your organization is a fun exercise to help establish word association, Dahms explained.

For example, “caring” and “compassionate” are words that staff will come up with in thinking of the organization. They may also think of words that are on the negative side.

“Also, encourage them to think of things that may not be so positive, maybe things like ‘slow to respond, too much paperwork,’ but these are the words that are going to help you build key messages about your program,” Dahms said.

**Build On Your Strengths**

Using the words your team comes up with, build on your strengths.

“Not all hospices are alike,” Dahms told audio conference listeners. “So if you are in a competitive market, figure out what it is that you do better than any other hospice program around, what sets you apart. Maybe it’s the number of staff available to respond to needs; maybe it’s nurses with advanced certification in hospice care.”

For example, Hospice of the Red River Valley took one simple step to change its tag line from “Serving Patients and Families Since 1981” to “Trusted by Physicians, Patients and Families Since 1981.”

“The reason for that is that trust is built over a period of time,” Dahms said, “and we wanted to establish the fact that we had been around for 24 years and doing
the work that we do, and that we have earned that trust by physicians, patient and families.”

**Competition Not an Issue?**

“If you’re the only hospice in the area, then emphasize the collaboration that you have with other healthcare facilities,” Dahms noted. “You’re an extension of what they do; you’re a partner with them; you’re the best end-of-life care option – they’re the best option for other things – and that you’re another source of help and support.”

Be the first in the minds of your target audience, and then be the best.

“So, there are some marketing phrases that, if you can’t be first, create a category that you can be first in,” Dahms said. “Be first in their mind and then be the best that you can be in that category.”
About hospice letter

An essential tool for hospice managers, hospice letter stays on top of the most current challenges facing hospice executives, including legislative scrutiny, the short average length of stay, Medicare and Medicaid reform, discussions about physician-assisted suicide, managed care and integration.

Each month, hospice letter has the latest management intelligence regarding financing strategies, marketing success stories, solutions to staffing and management challenges, funding opportunities and legislative alerts, and updates about federal agencies, such as the Office of Inspector General and CMS. And, information you won’t find anywhere else —like our budget, year-end, and salary and benefits surveys.

By reporting on activities in the nation’s hospices and including the name of a contact person at the end of each article, hospice letter also serves as an exchange medium and promotes networking among hospice professionals.

hospice letter has been published monthly since 1979. When hospice letter began, the hospice concept of caring for the terminally ill was just being introduced in the United States. At that time, federal officials had identified fewer than 60 hospice programs operating or being formed. There are now thousands of hospices in the United States.