Hospital Marketing and Public Relations:
Local Hospitals Meeting New Challenges

By John Fries for Chicago Hospital News

There was a time when hospitals didn't have to invest large amounts of time and money to communicate with the audiences they served. Health screenings, news releases, newsletters, physician referrals, and the occasional ribbon cutting to celebrate the opening of a new unit were among the tools of the hospital community relations practitioner's trade.

Then, things began to change in major ways. Hospitals started competing in the marketplace, managed care came along, and health systems began to form. Today's patients still largely look to their physicians for hospital referrals. But they're also educated consumers with faster access to more health care information than ever before. They're smart, streetwise and savvy, and they're taking an increasingly active role in making decisions about their health care and medical treatment.

It's a brand new day. Hospitals now need to approach marketing and communications in much the same way as Fortune 500 companies. Strategic planning, branding, redesigning corporate identity systems and conducting focus groups are just a few of the scientific methods now employed by hospitals to help them define their constituencies, communicate with them, manage their perceptions and motivate action. And, yesterday's community relations manager is today's healthcare marketing specialist.

While the many hospitals across Chicago actively market their facilities, specialties and services, what's interesting are the diverse approaches they take to grabbing their audience's attention, keeping it and motivating revenue-generating referrals.

Branding and Marketing a New Network
The Alexian Brothers Hospital Network, created in 1999, is a 900-bed health system comprised of four hospitals in the northwest suburbs that provide acute care, rehabilitation and behavioral health care.

Mike Kearns, the network's vice president of marketing, joined the staff a little over a year-and-a-half ago. Since coming on board, he has spent much of his time overseeing an integrated marketing effort, encompassing mass and targeted communications and media relations, to launch and sustain the newly created "Alexian Advanced Medicine" brand. His objective is to position the hospital network and its physicians as providing the best advanced medical care available in the region.

An extensive print and television advertising campaign, an array of new publications targeted to audiences ranging from physicians to the public, and a strong media relations effort are now promoting the brand, which focuses on the Alexian Network's eight centers of excellence. The creative execution is compellingly written and visually stunning.

Kearns, whose extensive background includes several years as a marketing executive at other Chicago area hospitals and at two major Chicago ad agencies, said that the branding efforts are
critical to ensuring long-term success. Our hospitals offer everything available in the city hospitals in a convenient suburban setting, and the advertising and communications materials strongly reflect that," said Kearns.

He cites the network's Center for Medical Innovation, Physician Learning Lab and Clinical Research Institute as among Alexian Brothers' many points of differentiation that are promoted in the messages.

"We're also marketing a great new service called AlexianConnects," said Kearns. "While many hospitals have a physician referral phone line, we go well beyond customer expectations. When people call to ask about a physician appointment, an advisor, one of six on the AlexianConnects staff, takes the call, contacts the doctor's office and coordinates the connection between the prospective patient and the person in the doctor's office who schedules appointments."

Kearns added that 80 percent of the people who make appointments through AlexianConnects are able to see a doctor within five to seven days.

Kearns believes strongly in the power of ongoing advertising as a key part of the media mix, to reinforce the brand and motivate patient referrals. He said that Alexian Brothers has campaigns planned well into 2004. "Most hospitals don't sustain the advertising effort year after year, but you have to advertise consistently if you want to get people to change their behavior, he said.

The network does a good deal of television advertising, which Kearns is especially fond of "because it can be used to powerfully dramatize health care benefits to patients."

He's also a believer in the strength of the Internet, and said that several Alexian Brothers websites are now in the planning stage--one for each center of excellence--that will soon be accessible through the network's home page. "Each will be as disease-oriented as possible," according to Kearns, "because that's how people are searching for health information."

Among its several branded publications, Alexian Brothers has introduced HealthLife, an extensive, 32-page calendar of community education programs and support groups, under the supervision of Matt Wakely, the network's director of public relations.

What makes the network's progressive approach to marketing all the more interesting is the fact that the Alexian Brothers themselves are a Roman Catholic order that has been helping the sick, poor, aged, and dying for more than 700 years, which means they've probably been around longer than most hospitals. By the way, several of the Brothers play an active role in hospital administration, and are very involved in the ongoing marketing efforts.

"What it all comes down to," said Kearns, "is communicating to our audience that we offer the best choice in health care in the Chicago area."

**Directing Marketing and Public Relations From Outside the Hospital**

Developing, implementing and managing public relations and marketing programs doesn't mean one has to be in the hospital every day. Just ask Barbara Fallon of Fallon & Associates. Over the past few decades, she's led marketing and communications initiatives for a number of hospitals and associations and has worked on government health projects.
Twenty-one years ago, she moved from the East Coast to the Midwest. Ten years ago, while Fallon was serving as vice president of marketing and business development at a local hospital, downsizing became the norm in health care.

Fallon, who was astute enough to recognize an excellent opportunity, left her executive position behind to launch a consulting practice. She found a niche in providing marketing and public relations services to not-for-profits whose internal talent had been downsized.

She worked for MacNeal as an external consultant, and hasn't looked back since. A decade later, she handles marketing and public relations for MacNeal Health Network, a 427-bed, medical-surgical-teaching hospital that includes a network of 11 community care centers.

MacNeal doesn't have an in-house marketing department. Fallon fills that role, often working from her home office. For her, it's a great way to work. For the hospital, it's cost-effective.

She interacts chiefly with MacNeal's vice president of business development, and assigns writing, graphic design and web design projects to freelance staff when necessary. Her responsibilities range from collaborating with the hospital administration on public relations and marketing strategy to developing creative and implementing tactics. She said the ethnic makeup of the local population provides some interesting communications and cultural challenges.

"MacNeal is a big city hospital in a suburban setting," said Fallon, "and the neighborhood is a blend of ethnicity. Specifically, there's a strong eastern European and Hispanic presence."

To effectively communicate with the people in the community served by the hospital, she develops advertising and collateral materials in three languages. "I also need to be sensitive to cultural barriers and bridges."

While older adults make up a large portion of the patient population, younger family members are helping them with translations and making health care decisions. For this reason, she said, programs designed for seniors are often advertised in media targeting younger people.

"Much of the advertising we do is action-oriented, so we can measure its effectiveness. For example, we'll run ads that include a raffle for a free screening, a phone number to call or something a patient can bring when they visit."

Fallon said that some things have remained very constant over the years, including the need to build and maintain a strong brand identity. Also, maintaining a balanced mix of media, and knowing what tactics work best in what situations.

The need for effective public and internal communication and interaction is also key. For Fallon, this means working in close partnership with employees and the medical staff.

One thing that has dramatically changed is the focus on results, especially given the tight economy of the past few years. "Today, in addition to creating awareness of solutions related to the community's health care needs, it's necessary to have a business rationale for our initiatives. We need to measure outcomes and be flexible in implementation of plans. It's also crucial to be able to provide quick response, be topical and help clinical experts share their knowledge."
She added that the increased focus on how her work supports the hospital's business plan proves that marketing and public relations aren't a luxury, but a necessity.

"I'm accountable, and always under scrutiny regarding the value I bring in ensuring a strong return on investment, for both the community and the organization," she said.

**Marketing Autonomy at a Health System Hospital**

Many health systems are heavily branded, strictly enforcing everything from writing style to the exact amount of space around the logo, as spelled out in detail in the graphic standards manual.

Provena Health, however, isn't one of them.

Michael Meyer is vice president of marketing and public relations at Provena Mercy Center in Aurora, a 340-bed community and tertiary hospital that serves the Far West suburbs. He joined the staff a little over a year ago after spending 10 years as marketing director at Alexian Brothers Medical Center in Elk Grove Village, IL.

In his new environment, he appreciates the high degree of autonomy he is afforded. "Although we don't currently do branding as a health system, we have a marketing and communications strategy that focuses on the hospital's image and strengths, and has been very successful," said Meyer.

That strategy, launched last year, encompasses an integrated mix that runs on three distinct tracks: print advertising, media relations and community outreach. "The foundation is in place," he said of his 2003 efforts, "and now we can build on it."

A strong community relations effort is a major cornerstone of the program. The hospital serves a diverse ethnic population, 40 percent of which is Hispanic, and provides about $3 million a year in charity care. Like many hospitals, Provena Mercy Center had to deal with difficult reimbursement issues last year.

Meyer said that one of the advantages of being a Catholic hospital is its benevolent attitude about ministering to the needs of its population. The hospital also partners with local agencies to provide off-site services to the public.

"We offer quite a bit in the way of health screenings and community education programs held in a variety of locations, like libraries, malls and shopping centers," he said. "This enables us to have direct contact with the people in the communities we serve, and it helps us to identify health problems early. Last year, through our screening programs, we found very serious health problems and made immediate referrals so they could be addressed quickly."

On the advanced medical side, Provena Mercy Center's media relations efforts have generated a considerable amount of coverage. The hospital was the first in the area to introduce an open-heart surgery program, and received a five-star rating in 2003 for its orthopedic program from HealthGrades, a leading provider of quality information on hospitals nationwide. In November, a $33 million surgery center expansion project was announced. And a partnership with The WISH Center, which specializes in gastric bypass surgery, garnered the hospital widespread coverage on Fox News, Dateline NBC and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).
In 2003, the hospital developed and introduced a new corporate identity program, including a new logo and tagline. New image and service line campaigns will be launched in 2004, including expanded print advertising and new cable television spots, and the public and community relations efforts will continue as strong as ever.

"It's an exciting time for Provena Mercy Center," said Meyer.