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HOSPICE UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

Sensitive Tactics for Marketing Hospice Care

By Merrily Orsini



Marketing hospice services can be a delicate matter. However, in today's competitive market place, it is not only appropriate but essential for an agency to aggressively, yet tactfully, market its services. Facing end-of-life care can be an uncomfortable prospect for a patient and his/her family, but if a feeling of comfort and familiarity with an agency is created through specific marketing techniques before services even begin, then an agency will be positioned squarely above the competition.

When marketing hospice care, it is important to keep in mind emotional needs and privacy. This places the Internet in a key position for hospice care marketing due to the anonymity and accessibility of the Web. Understanding how best to use the Web as marketing and sales tools in these private situations becomes of the utmost importance.

Some tips for selling hospice services while using the marketing power of the Internet include:

- Think "individual" and "personalized" for each inquiry that relates to a hospice patient.
 - Create a Web site design to support this philosophy that includes visuals for all services your agency provides to support hospice clientele.
- Include an inquiry process that allows for individual, immediate follow-up.
- List a name and contact information for inquiries about care.
- Include numerous links to downloadable information on various topics for people seeking more information.
- Make use of PR. It is a way to "put a face" on the agency and make the agency name familiar.
 - Post any articles or mentions the agency receives on the Web in a special media section. This helps families feel that the hospice service is more credible. These article postings are also good for Search Engine Optimization (SEO), as links from reputable sites, giving a higher ranking to the agency site.
- Create marketing pieces that showcase individual members of the hospice team.
 - Include individual professional photographs taken by a reputable headshot photographer, and include information on the Web site about the people behind the business.
- Be sure to include contact information near the photographs, as potential clients may feel more comfortable during the first difficult interaction if they can speak with someone whose picture they have seen.
- Focus on being a resource to the community and meeting educational needs of those preparing for the loss of a loved one.
 - Offer a Web site rich in resources that is maintained and updated regularly.
 - Write articles regularly and present seminars on an ongoing basis. Be sure to post and tout these items on the Web site.
 - Create a relationship/resource listing with hospice staff and grief counselors to use as referral sources. Posting this resource listing on the Web site provides additional assistance to those searching for answers.
 - Create downloadable handouts with aftercare resource information that is regularly updated.
- Update the Web site and maintain it regularly.

- Network with associations and organizations that offer services to older people or to those with chronic or terminal illnesses, and post links to those organizations on the Web site.
- Become active in targeted associations and organizations that have end-of-life possibilities as their focus. Write stories about these organizations, and post the stories on the site with links back to the organizations.
- When purchasing ad space or sponsoring, choose aging or end-of-life associated events at churches and neighborhood organizations. When sponsoring or attending these events, send releases with bulleted items or Op-Ed articles to the media. If these are picked up by the media and placed on media Web sites, this will also serve to assist in getting people to the events, and the cross links

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for the events, the agency, and organization Web sites will help rankings for SEO.

- Use branding on absolutely all materials. The Web is an extension of an agency's marketing materials, not just an IT venue.
- Create eye-catching visual sales tools for the Web and for in-person inquiries. Add these sales tools as downloadable items on the agency's site.

Family issues and feelings are incredibly important to take into consideration when marketing hospice services. Ensure that the hospice staff is sensitive to an individual's right to privacy, and that they understand the highly emotional feelings accompanying any hospice decision. When marketing an agency through the Web site, keep in mind the use of PR, network with organizations and seminar offerings, so that your agency can be more recognizable than another, and at the same time, maintain sensitivity towards a potential client's end-of-life desires.

About the Author: *Merrily Orsini, MSSW, is Managing Director of Corecubed, an integrated marketing communications company that specializes in home care and home health industries. Orsini has been active in internet marketing since 1990. She is an 18-year veteran of the private duty industry and currently serves on the Advisory Board of the Private Duty Homecare Association of America.*