

# How Hospitals Should Respond to Consumer Questions About Their Economic Stability

by *Veronica Hunt*

Recently, Novation, a leading health care contracting services company, surveyed client hospitals about the economy's impact on their organization. The survey indicated interest among patients about the stability of their local hospital and difficulty accepting changes necessitated by difficult financial times.

As consumers read about the economic fallout and themselves feel the pain of a flagging economy, many are asking their local hospitals the following questions:

- How are you doing?
- Are you planning to cut any services?
- Will you be here for me in the future?
- Are the state's fiscal problems going to impact, or are they already affecting, the hospital? How?
- As more people lose their jobs and end up coming to the ER, how is the hospital responding?
- Are any hospital education and outreach programs in jeopardy?
- Has the hospital laid off people?
- Are you hiring?
- Will you continue with the construction of the new building?

## **Be fully informed**

These questions require thoughtful, well-informed responses. As a marketing and communications strategist, you need to know the answers to these and other questions and to assist senior executives in their responses.

You should fully understand the financial status of your organization, and that includes being armed with information about services that may be reduced or eliminated because they are not profitable. You should also confirm your financial knowledge of services that are key revenue generators and how promotional dollars should be spent, going forward, to support these services. If yours is a not-for-profit organization, you should also have information about fund-raising goals and results.

## **Develop key messages**

When you have the information you need, develop a communications plan with key messages and supporting points about the financial condition of your hospital. The role of the communications department is to lead your organization in sharing relevant information with the public – employees, physicians, patients, community leaders, suppliers, and the media. In this age of transparency, your organization must let its constituents know how it is doing.

Develop succinct, clear messages. Author and trainer Vince Covello's concept of 27/9/3 suggests a total of 27 words, or an average of nine words for each of three messages. You should follow up your messages with supporting examples. For instance:

- We are confident about our hospital's financial future.
  - Our hospital already has 60 percent of the funds needed to provide new services, our debt ratio has been decreasing since 2005, and banks have deemed us creditworthy.
- While our hospital has been affected, we are confident in our future.
  - We have frozen hiring and salaries, but have not reduced clinical staff.
  - We will construct a new patient wing, but we will not start until 2010.
  - Banks tell us that we are creditworthy.
- We are being smarter, quicker, and more efficient.
  - We decided to forgo some purchases and order more handheld computers because the Obama administration is moving health care in this direction.
  - We have empowered our people more. They are creating new ways to inventory supplies and are negotiating stringent contracts for numerous services.
- We are improving how services are delivered.
  - We are consolidating some services in one building to save on leasing additional space.
  - We are partnering with XYZ, which will now provide outpatient dialysis for the community.

## **Maximize opportunity**

Communicating how your organization is doing is a great opportunity to reassure your community members about your commitment to them and your intent to provide the best care possible. As you communicate messages about how your hospital is handling economic challenges, be sure to maximize the opportunity to:

- *Raise awareness about your organization's programs and services.* Remind constituents about the value your organization brings to the local community.
- *Promote organizational goals.* If your organization has plans to expand facilities, develop new programs, or support new specialties, then tell your community. A community that knows about proposed opportunities being planned for its benefit is more likely to rally and stand behind your organization and support its success.
- *Build loyalty.* An organization that is open and honest engenders the support and dedication of its patrons. Dedicated patrons are vocal about the organizations they support and value.
- *Establish partnerships.* Other organizations in your community may be struggling. There is strength in numbers, so together you may discover solutions and opportunities. In turn, other organizations that learn of your plight may be able to help you.

### **Deliver your story**

How you communicate information to your community about your organization's economic situation and recovery efforts is just as important. Make sure you are delivering consistent, clear, and concise messages through multiple communications channels. All communications – Internet, intranet, employee and physician newsletters, marketing collateral, media stories, and so on – should deliver the same message geared to the needs of the intended audience.

You want to do everything possible to ensure that your constituents learn of your organization's position from you first – and that when they repeat the information, it is accurate.

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