

# Care communications: PR and the nonprofit sector

**PR can go beyond performing great work and also tackle good deeds, by offering its talents to the nonprofit healthcare sector.**

By Sally Ramsay and Jess Ferdinand

**D**ifficult economic times have put nonprofit healthcare organizations in a tough spot. To survive, they must continue asking for donations without providing a tangible return. At the same time, a decrease in private donations and government funding usually correlates with an increased need for services. These considerations, combined with uncertainty surrounding our healthcare system and economy, make it critical for healthcare nonprofits to truly stand out in the marketplace.

Today's nonprofit healthcare landscape is not only competitive — it's crowded. How can a nonprofit organization with a limited budget rise above the noise and competition? How can it gain the public's attention, commitment and resources? How can it remain viable in an uncertain economy? One thing is for sure: great work and noble deeds just aren't enough anymore.

So, what are PR and marketing firms doing to help these organizations tell their stories in ways that engage and maintain audiences and donor pools? We can give them the same advice as we do their for-profit counterparts: develop and implement a professional-grade communications plan that will raise awareness among target audiences, engage and motivate supporters and ultimately achieve the business goals necessary to fulfill the organization's mission.

While every nonprofit healthcare organization is different and faces unique challenges, all communications and marketing efforts should make allowances for the following:

**A compelling story can make up for a lack of budget and then some.** Every organization must develop a unique story along with core messaging to serve as the foundation of their communications strategy. Stories are also a natural fit for content marketing. Sprinkling stories through a website and including them as blog posts is very cost effective and can also be extremely impactful in generating interest and donations.

**A communications strategy and plan steers an organization's marketing and PR efforts on the path to success.** Even the most compelling stories won't reach audiences if they are not implemented through a well-defined communications strategy and plan. Nonprofits are compet-

ing for attention and resources just like everyone else and need to be rigorous and consistent in delivering their messaging and conducting targeted activities and outreach.

**A thought leadership platform elevates the credibility and visibility of your brand and ensures greater loyalty and success.** A thought leader is viewed as having a deep understanding of a specific market and the needs of its customers — and as a trusted and innovative provider of expertise and solutions. Thought leadership must be consistently and actively cultivated by identifying expert spokespeople and engaging with media, influencers and supporters. Professional media training is recommended to ensure spokespeople stay on message and are prepared for a variety of topics and questions.

**Engaged brand ambassadors tell your story in an authentic and relatable way.** Employees, board members and volunteers are an organization's best brand ambassadors, but this opportunity is often missed in the course of brand promotion. Make sure stakeholders know and share the organization's mission and story; offer basic training to ensure each team member can communicate that story in a consistent manner; and provide resources like news updates, event information and approved success stories that are easily shared through channels including Facebook and Twitter. Involving recipients of services is also a powerful way to engage audiences and demonstrate value.

**Reputation management helps to "crisis-proof" an organization.** Organizations that are unprepared to respond to the public and other key stakeholders during an incident risk jeopardizing patient or patron relationships, drawing the ire of regulators and lawmakers, losing employees and recruits, and ultimately decreasing the valuation of their organizations. This is a huge unmanaged risk that can be addressed through crisis communications planning. Today, responding effectively requires considering more stakeholders than ever. The good news is that the tools to manage that risk and the upside for doing so successfully get better every day.

## Case study: The Rose

The Rose, a leading non-profit breast cancer awareness and screening organization in the Texas Gulf Coast, has worked since 1986 to ensure all women, including

those without insurance, have access to life-saving screening, diagnostic and treatment services. For every of two or three insured women's screenings, The Rose covers the cost of one uninsured woman's care. In 2012, The Rose was growing concerned about its long-term viability. The organization was providing state-of-the-art care and had great relationships with a large pool of referring physicians, but increasingly was only being referred the uninsured patients.

After extensive research and evaluation of The Rose's existing business model, Pierpont identified several key factors for success, built a strong brand platform that uncovered differentiating factors, and developed proactive brand messaging to reach its target audience. Pierpont created an integrated public outreach plan that encouraged and reminded physicians and other partners to refer insured women to The Rose via a Physician Referral Network. Current insured patrons of The Rose took steps to educate the broader Houston-area community.

Since implementation of the plan The Rose has seen a steady rise in the number of referred insured patients and also used the final plan to secure grants. Based on this success, The Rose is launching a new campaign, Me2, which asks women to make a commitment to breast health care. To date The Rose has served more than 32,000 women a year, performing over 56,000 procedures.

As the marketplace becomes more crowded and competition for donor and grant dollars more fierce, effective PR and marketing will be a key differentiator in raising a nonprofit's visibility in the community, attracting individual donors and securing grants, all of which ensure organizations can keep doing their great work.

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