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Preparing Your Post-Pandemic Marketing Strategy

By Dan Dunlop and Jared Johnson

Right now, our hospitals and health systems are facing far more than a public health crisis; they are facing a financial crisis that could threaten their very survival. It is estimated that most hospitals and health systems will lose at least 25% of their projected annual revenue as a result of the pandemic. How will these organizations recover and how can their marketing departments help? It may seem unfathomable, but it is essential that hospital marketing teams find the time to plan for the inevitable pivot from ongoing COVID-19 communications to revenue-generating service line marketing. Although COVID-19 may stay with us for some time to come, the crisis will come to an end and hospitals must be prepared to hit the ground running with marketing that drives patient volume to profitable services. We can't wait to start planning and developing marketing content once the pandemic is over. We simply do not have the luxury of taking two or three months to ramp up. Our response has to be swift and well planned. As the pandemic winds down, your plan for moving forward must be in place with marketing channels defined and content ready to launch.

Revisit Your Annual Marketing Strategy

The first step is to revisit your annual marketing plan and determine its relevance given the new economic realities your organization now faces. For example, you may well have planned to market service lines or procedures that do not have significant contribution margins but bring other benefits to your organization. Speaking candidly, hospitals have been known to promote service lines with no capacity in order to appease a particularly outspoken service line leader or clinical chief. In short, this is not the time for that kind of decision-making. This is the time to promote services that support the business objectives that are paramount to your organization's survival. Given your hospital's financial needs, you may have to change your thinking regarding which services you promote as we come out of this crisis. Ideally, the services will have capacity to add patient volume and are known to have significant contribution margins.

As your organization moves from COVID-19 communications to revenue-generating marketing in the months to come, the shift could seem abrupt or even callous if it is not done with significant planning and finesse. Therefore, we recommend a phased approach that will guide your communications through the decline in COVID-19 communications and onward to the launch of traditional service line marketing. In essence, you need a strategic plan to guide your marketing through this transition.

A Phased Plan

As you plan for post-pandemic marketing, your communications should be highly intentional and strategic; the time for being reactive has passed. This is about developing content and messaging that brings patients back to your hospital for fundamental services and elective procedures.

- 1. Pandemic Communication Maintenance Phase** – We are currently in the Pandemic Communication Maintenance Phase. It was preceded by the Crisis Communications Phase. In this maintenance phase, your organization should begin laying the foundation for post-pandemic



marketing by using messaging that reminds consumers that you are there for them in good times and bad. Our hospitals are there for them day-in and day-out. We're here when you need us, to provide cancer care, to fix broken arms, remove gall bladders, and deliver babies. You should expect that people in your community may well have some fear of visiting healthcare facilities immediately following the pandemic. That would be only natural. Continue to use your leading clinicians to reassure people that you are taking all of the necessary steps to treat COVID-19 patients while keeping the hospital safe for employees and other patients. This is a great time to share mission-based messaging and to emphasize your ongoing commitment to the community.

During this phase, although nearly everyone agrees you should not be doing service line marketing, it is appropriate to stay in contact with patients who had procedures postponed, in order to reschedule their procedure. In that communication you can begin the process of dispelling any fear they might have about eventually returning to the hospital due to the virus. For the foreseeable future, it will be important to share with your various audiences all the things you are doing to keep the hospital and your clinics safe and clean.

- 2. Declining Threat Phase** – As the threat of the pandemic begins to decline, your plan should include messages and content that celebrate the contributions of your employees, physicians, nurses, and other clinical staff. Many of you are already doing this. You will also want to publicly acknowledge the connection that has developed between the community and the hospital. Pay tribute to the organizations and individuals who came to your support. Through your marketing, you will want to wrap yourself in content that shows the strength of the bond between the community and your organization. At this point in time, it will make sense to begin talking about a future state when things return to normal. It will be appropriate to produce more aspirational communications that point toward the day when all of this is behind us. Let your audiences begin looking forward with you. What will the new normal look like and how will you cope with it together?

A small critical access hospital in Morrisville, Vermont, Copley Hospital, has been using messaging that lays the foundation for a return to normalcy. Facebook posts with the headline “We continue to serve” make the powerful implication that Copley was there for its community before the pandemic and will continue to serve into the future. For us, it very subtly spoke to the promise of normalcy. A lot may have changed in the world as a result of this pandemic, but your local hospital is still here serving the community.

As mentioned earlier, this is a good time to make sure your various service lines are communicating directly with patients who had elective procedures postponed. The communication should be crafted in an intentional manner. These patients and their family members need to be assured it is safe to return to the hospital. Begin laying that foundation now. Share with them all of the steps you are taking to keep the hospital safe for employees and patients. This will need to be one theme within your communications as your organization emerges from the pandemic.

- 3. Transition Phase** – Just before returning to a state of normalcy, and just prior to transitioning to service line marketing, we recommend clearly signaling to the community that you are preparing to return to business as usual. It is important to acknowledge that we will be forever changed by this crisis. It is important to give your constituents, internal and external, an opportunity to



join you in celebration as you prepare to move forward. This might mean sponsoring or hosting a community gathering where you celebrate your employees and honor those who lost their lives. This would be the ideal time to also recognize community organizations, businesses, government leaders, and individuals who lent their support during the crisis. This gathering will signal to your community and employees that the hospital is turning a corner and is ready to move forward in the post-pandemic era—opening the door to more traditional, service line marketing. Think about messaging that links the hospital and the community: “We’ve gone through this journey together, and we will rebuild together. This is our community, and we are proud to be your healthcare provider in good times and bad.”

You will also continue with messaging that reassures your constituents that the hospital is a clean and safe place for patients, family members, and employees.

4. **Revenue-Generating Phase** – After transitioning your community and staff out of the world of non-stop COVID-19 communications, it will be time to hit the ground running with marketing that supports your hospital’s need for financial recovery. For most of you, that will mean promoting services where there is capacity and that have a significant contribution margin.

Will the Pandemic Change Your Approach to Marketing?

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, our healthcare leaders (doctors, nurses, and other providers of direct patient care) have been the most credible and impactful communicators. People in your communities have looked to clinicians for information and advice to put aside their fears. Clinicians, often speaking to their communities on video, have proven to be authentic and trusted sources with content relevant to local audiences. As you pivot to post-pandemic marketing, it makes sense to continue to rely on your clinicians and leverage the equity they have built with the community. Although we firmly believe that the patient should be at the center of most marketing efforts, the pandemic has changed our world – at least for the time being. From our perspective, a smart strategy will involve integrating trusted clinicians into your service line marketing, building on that equity that has been established during the COVID-19 crisis.

It is to your advantage to give your post-pandemic marketing a human face and feel. During this time of isolation and social distancing, think about how good it feels just to get on a video call with a friend or colleague. Across the board, we are hungry for that human connection. The public received some of that through the faces of our clinicians when they would appear on local new channels or in hospital-produced videos. If we want to engage consumers in the post-pandemic era, we need to build on that by making our organization more human and approachable.

What Impact will the Pandemic have on Content Marketing?

Of all the communications tools relied upon during the pandemic, video content seems to have emerged as one of the most powerful. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, video was already on its way to becoming a leading element of content marketing programs for hospitals and health systems. However, the pandemic has exposed new audiences to video communications both in the form of live video conferences (Zoom) and recorded video content. The communities we serve will emerge from this crisis with a greater comfort level for online video, making it a more attractive option.



While social distancing, people across America have been attending Pilates and Yoga classes on video, having Zoom calls with family members across the country, and attending classes online. They have also been exposed to less highly produced videos shot on mobile devices. Video clips shot on cell phones have even made their way into national television commercials for major corporations. Since this has happened in the context of the pandemic, it remains to be seen how this impacts the public's appetite for more highly produced video content. But it certainly opens the door to more exploration with video shot on smartphones.

Coordination between content marketing and digital advertising will be critical. This is the time for heightened coordination between your owned and paid media efforts. Having all team members and outside partners fully aligned on what's running, in what channels, to which audiences will be more important than ever. Consumers will be more sensitive to ads that feel crass, out of touch, or don't acknowledge how much their lives have changed. Digital marketing can take advantage of the desire for more public health information. This is an opportunity to polish campaigns with tighter messaging, better segmenting, and targeting—drawing upon the full power of CRM and marketing automation tools.

Cash-strapped hospitals are likely to pour more budget into digital advertising as the means to build their funnel for service lines with the highest contribution margins. When a hospital needs patient volume for a specific set of specialties and procedures, digital marketing provides them a targeted, measurable, and cost-effective approach. Digital tactics also allow a healthcare organization to be nimble and turn on a dime as conditions change.

A good percentage of these digital advertising dollars will likely continue to pour into Google and Facebook because they are familiar channels. The challenge is that this will lead to more competition for common keywords, so the Cost Per Click (CPC) will likely increase—possibly in a substantial way. To supplement this, your digital campaigns will need to be even more intentional and targeted. At the same time, there will be more hunger for factual information about specific procedures as opposed to generic brand messages, so pay close attention to campaign performance and be ready to pause or swap out under-performing campaigns. Take the time now to review every landing page and ad group to ensure that nothing gets missed, factoring in enough lead time to account for the substantial amount of time it can take to review every ad and switch out creative.

The Gift of Community

We feel that it is important to address our perspective on the role that “community” should play in healthcare marketing as we move beyond this crisis. Without a doubt, it's hard to find anything good about this pandemic. Healthcare workers are dying on the front lines; tens of thousands of Americans will lose their lives; businesses have been forced to close their doors and lay off their employees; and hospitals risk bankruptcy. Yet, there is one silver lining for those of us who work in healthcare: the gift of community.

It seems odd that in a time of social distancing we would be writing about community; but everywhere we look, we see communities rallying behind their local hospitals. Regular people in communities across America are sewing face masks for their local healthcare workers. Millions of masks! Small and large businesses are donating PPE to their community hospitals. Others are delivering meals to healthcare workers. The generosity, kindness, and appreciation displayed in



these gifts are exactly what you'd hope to see when there is a strong community bond with a local healthcare organization. It is nonetheless remarkable.

What is interesting to us about this outpouring of support for healthcare organizations and healthcare workers is that most Americans are usually disconnected from their healthcare providers. Hospitals, healthcare, and health are not things they want to think about day-in and day-out. Hospitals and healthcare workers are in the background, often taken for granted. As community members, we want our hospitals and providers to be there, but don't want to think about them; and we certainly don't want to invest in them. The same can be said of our public health system. For healthcare organizations, engaging members of their community is a difficult task.

For years, we've shared our perspective that hospitals and health systems need to stop mindlessly spewing advertising content in the direction of consumers and do more to build community. We've advocated for approaching marketing from a community-building perspective. This has been in response to the fact that hospitals continually market their various specialties, promote their national rankings, yet do very little marketing or communication that is truly relevant to our constituents. For the most part, we don't provide communication that is of value to the communities we serve. As a result, we aren't successfully engaging our communities and those who live within them.

Yet, here we are, in the middle of a fierce pandemic, and our communities are reaching out to their local hospitals to show their support and to lend a hand. **This renewed connection with our communities is the gift of this pandemic.** My advice is to embrace that connection and never let it go. We should do everything we can to amplify that connection. As we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, and we will emerge, we need to have strategies in place for leveraging this newfound bond with our communities. While we're celebrating the amazing work and sacrifices made by our healthcare heroes (all of our employees), we also need to publicly celebrate the contributions made by the community. We need to celebrate the small businesses and individuals who stepped up and made a difference. And we need to find ways to involve these people moving forward.

Think of your community as a blanket. You need to wrap your organization in that blanket of support and appreciation. And you need to cherish that blanket realizing that it is the foundation upon which to build your marketing. You got through this pandemic together—community and hospital. And you will move forward together. As our hospitals work to dig out of the financial crisis brought on or worsened by this pandemic, we will need our communities by our side.

We know you are stressed and overwhelmed

How do you create a post-pandemic marketing strategy and plan when you are knee deep in COVID-19 communications? If you are fully immersed in the pandemic, assign the development of the plan to a marketing partner or members of your team. Then try using just 20 or 30 minutes each day to do a progress check-in and to answer important questions. Who do we need to be talking to internally to get the information we need to complete this plan? Where will we have the greatest potential for driving patient volume and increasing net profit? Which clinicians can we leverage in future marketing efforts? Are there physicians we need to start showcasing now, during the pandemic, so that they are better positioned as spokespeople once the crisis has receded? What kind of funds will we have post-pandemic, and how will that impact our choice of marketing channels?



This pandemic will come to an end and when it does, you are going to want to be able to hit the ground running with impactful marketing that brings people back to your hospital and clinics. We implore you to start preparing for post-pandemic marketing effort today. The planning that you do this week or this month has the potential to make a huge impact on the future of your organization.

Planning for post-pandemic marketing may seem like a daunting task given all that you've got on your plate right now. If we can help in any way with the development or execution of your marketing strategy, please reach out.

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