

9 Secrets to Communicating Change Within Healthcare

Written by Ross K. Goldberg, President, Kevin/Ross Public Relations | October 23, 2013

There are certainties and then there are uncertainties.

We are certain that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act will bring about change, but just how beneficial will that change be for Americans and our healthcare system?

We are certain that the industry is being bombarded with messages about population health management, but will that concept truly take hold, or will it turn out to be nothing more than a reincarnation of a notion that fluttered and died in prior lives? And we are certain that we are entering a new era of mergers, acquisitions and assorted creative partnerships involving providers and payers, but will these organizations truly be successful in aligning incentives and building a better tomorrow?

One thing of which we can be certain is that change is more than on the horizon....it is here. As leaders of that change, hospital executives have a myriad of challenges with which to grapple including legal structures, financial imperatives, human resources, information technology, operational design and so much more. Central to that checklist should be communication. Done incorrectly, the fallout from change not explained in a strategic and thoughtful way has the potential to hover like a bad smell over your organization for years to come. But done properly, you can cultivate all of your constituents (or at least most of them) into ambassadors who will enthusiastically carry your message to family, friends and the community.

Here are nine secrets to help make sure that you get it right.

1. Communicate with your employees and other internal constituencies first. You never want your employees, medical staff, volunteers and board members to be taken off-guard by what they see on the internet or read in the morning newspaper. It may be cliché to say that these individuals are your most important assets, but there is no escaping that truth. This is your chance to build credibility and trust among an audience that is central to your success. And the more they embrace the change, the more they will be able to deliver the kind of patient experience that can differentiate you in the market.

2. Explain why. Too many people spend too much time on the who, what, where, when and how. While all of those particulars are important, "why" trumps them all. In firming up your messaging, the best place to start is to explain why your hospital is choosing to go through this change in simple terms that your audiences will understand. Once there is that understanding and acceptance — and once you have made your case in a compelling way — you can get into the who, what, when and how.

3. Place what you are doing in a larger context. The healthcare industry is undergoing dramatic changes, many brought about by the full implementation of the PPACA and some the result of other market forces. Hospitals, medical groups and health plans are all trying to determine how they fit. In communicating to your various audiences, don't view your situation in isolation. Place the change you are going through within this larger context and be proud of the fact that by undertaking your actions you are proactively helping to dictate your own future and sustainability, rather than just drifting wherever the winds may blow.

4. Remember that everyone accepts or handles change differently. Some people find change exciting and some find it disruptive. Some embrace it and some remain wedded to the past. You never know what lurks deep within an individual's thought process. Hospital leadership needs to understand this and be respectful of each person's

individual needs. So too, people choose to receive their messages in different ways, and it is important to communicate through whatever medium the recipients of those messages feel most comfortable. The internet including all aspects of social media? Traditional direct mail? Face-to-face? One on one or in groups? The medium is almost as important as the message.

5. Once is not enough. The keys to successful advertising or sales are repetition and consistency. Communicating change requires "selling" change, and that means once is not enough. Don't fall into the trap of believing that once you've communicated, your job is done. Effective communication needs constant feeding. Keep repeating your message with frequent updates and developments that keep all of your key constituents in the know. Most important, give people the chance to ask questions and engage in two-way conversation. This is one of the best ways to help them feel invested in and supportive of the change that is taking place.

6. Recognize that there is little in life more personal or important to consumers than the health of themselves and their families. Unfortunately, healthcare has become an overly complex industry loaded with unnecessary jargon, which makes communication more difficult. It also makes the distance between the hospital and the patient that much greater. Don't let those sand traps stand in your way. Cut the jargon and speak in simple to understand terms.

7. Never underestimate the power of the media. Whether traditional or online, the media has the capacity to mold public opinion and, for better or worse, and help set the agenda for discussion. They also have the ability to put you on the defensive — whether or not you have anything to be defensive about. You need to get ahead of the ball and control the narrative. That means utilizing the media wisely through op-eds, sit down interviews with local reporters and finding creative ways to leverage the media to tell your story in a sincere and credible way.

8. Don't pretend that you have all the answers or know for certain how the change will all end up, because in all likelihood you don't. That's okay. The cement hasn't dried yet. What people don't want to see is you trembling on the edge of maybe. Be optimistic but truthful about the road the lies ahead but also spell out the speed bumps and aftershocks that will come with this change. In the long run, people will appreciate your candor and will be more apt to trust you the next time you have an important message to communicate.

9. Stay true to your brand. A brand is more than a slogan, an ad, a bumper sticker or a clever tagline. It is a promise that you as an organization are making to your customers, business partners and employees. It should be deeply rooted in your organization and part of your DNA. All too often, change threatens to upend a brand. But if you let that happen, you will destroy the equity and currency you have created over time. Use change communication as an opportunity to build upon your brand: to make it stronger and to reaffirm your role as a leading and trusted healthcare resource in your community.

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