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Hospital Boards Need More PR Reps

They Should Think More Outside The Box on Appointments

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The makeup of hospital boards is a curious lot. Some are publicly elected and govern in accordance with district, city or county mandates. Some are comprised of investors who administer with short-term vision, accountable to shareholders' quarterly reports. Some serve in strictly an advisory capacity to a parent company, some populate themselves with physicians, and some tap into community leaders who – while experts in their own professions – have a long learning curve on the intricacies of today's healthcare environment.

That said, the composition of most hospital boards remains deficient in two important areas. First, most are still populated exclusively with “yesterday's leaders” – lawyers, bankers, local business owners and philanthropists who helped build the community and/or were fundamental to the hospital's development. But what about tomorrow's leaders? While appreciating that youth is more a state of mind than a time of life, it wouldn't hurt for hospital boards to consider adding some 20-somethings or 30-somethings among their ranks. Young people live in a different world, speak a different language, communicate in different ways and have different things that are important to them. We need to listen to what they have to say.

Speaking of communicating and listening, it is time that hospital boards more actively consider adding public relations professionals to their ranks. There is no upbringing or perspective that is more needed today.

It is a public relations perspective – more than any other – that allows a hospital to look through the lens of a consumer and understand what is important to them. Having this outlook is invaluable to a hospital that is trying to build (or rebuild) its brand or capture new market share or story tell in creative ways as traditional streams of revenue dry up.

A PR voice in the boardroom can remind the other board members that in this growing era of consumerism, hospitals must be committed to practicing daily the four most important elements of trust: integrity, honesty, promise-keeping and loyalty. Only when a hospital has those as its foundation can it truly appeal to a sense of community and play an important role in fostering its community's health and well-being ... thus truly fulfilling its mission.

It is a public relations voice in the boardroom that can help explain how to engage the public in many of the seminal issues with which we are grappling both as a nation and in local communities: cost, quality, access and fairness in how healthcare is paid for and delivered. An educated public is a powerful ally and PR is the tool that can build these alliances now and for the future. And speaking of engaging the public, public relations can remind board members that the most important thing they can do is listen.

Public relations representation on a hospital board can provide immeasurable value at the time of crisis. It can gauge public sentiment, craft key messages, identify barriers, and take a broad and unbiased view of how an issue will play with – and how to communicate with – all external and internal audiences. More importantly, having a public relations professional on the board can provide the up-front, strategic thinking that often can help prevent a crisis from escalating to the point where a hospital feels compelled to redesign the plane in mid-flight.

Ronald Reagan was once asked if he thought being an actor was an appropriate background for being President of the United States. He answered by saying that “I don't know how you CAN be President if you HAVEN'T been an actor.” So too, I don't know how a hospital board can function optimally and truly serve its community if it doesn't bring new blood and fresh perspectives to the table. Public relations is a good place to start.

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