PUBLIC RELATIONS IN HEALTH CARE

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Abstract
This paper sets out to demonstrate that the use of public relations in the health care system is a must. Hospitals, both private and public, are competing between each other for the same patients. With so much information available hospitals should make their voices heard, individually. This article will focus on a few aspects of health care public relations, such as branding for hospitals, crisis communication, target audiences. Also, it will provide a brief description of the situation in the Romanian health care system.

Keywords: public relations, hospitals, target audience, branding, crisis communication, media relations, fund raising, social media.

Hospitals and health care institutions can be a bit intimidating for most of us. Going to see a doctor is not always a walk in the parc. Having to trust somebody else with your life or with the life of a loved one can be a challenging experience. Trust, cooperation and transparency are the key words when it comes to the relationship between a doctor and a patient. However, this is rarely the case. Patients find it hard to trust their doctors; doctors don’t always give all the information to the patient, and therefore, their cooperation is threatened by this lack of transparency and trust. The only way to fix this problem is by communicating more efficiently – and this is where public relations come in.

Hospitals have become more specialized – from neurology to oncology; some have multiple wards, some have only one
specialization. Patients have access to the Internet, they can easily find information about a medical unit or about a doctor and so hospitals find themselves competing for the same patients. Public relations and marketing strategies have become important in health care because “through those forms of communication, hospitals are better able to let others know what they provide and how what they provide can benefit patients”

This paper will provide a starting point for an area in public relations that has not been, so far, exploited to its full potential. Hospitals and other health care institutions need the “know how” of public relations specialists in order to create a more comfortable climate for their patients and in order to create and preserve a better corporate image. Unfortunately, this kind of study requires ample space and this article cannot provide it. However, we will try to outline some of the issues that hospitals are confronted with and how public relations can prove to be helpful in these areas. This article will set out a theoretical framework for PR in the health care area – how can a hospital build a brand, how can a medical organization deal with a crisis situation or how can doctors improve their relationships with patients. These are just a few dimensions of what it means to manage the communication system for a health care organization. After that we will briefly discuss the current situation of the Romanian health care system, even though such an enterprise would require ample empirical research. This article will be designed to answer to some questions regarding the use of public relations in the health care area.

1. Why do hospitals need public relations?

This is probably the main question of this debate. Do hospitals really need a public relations department or the services of a specialized agency? People come to the hospital because they need to, not because they want to, some would argue. In that case, there is no need to advertise your hospital, because people have no choice. Or do they? The statement above is partially true. Yes, people don’t go to hospital for their own pleasure – like they go to a holiday resort, for instance – but they do have a choice: which hospital or which doctor to see. Hospitals, like other organizations, need to understand that they are competing between each other on a market and the stakes are high. Like every other institution, a hospital which communicates that it is trustworthy, that it can provide quality and specialized services, while being transparent will earn the trust and respect of the people.

Public relations can close the gap between a hospital and its audiences and it can build a bridge of reciprocal trust between the organization and its audience. Also, public relations have the responsibility of managing media relations; mass media can play a vital role in how the image of a hospital is perceived by the public, especially when the hospital is dealing with a crisis. Mass media can also offer legitimacy to some of the actions taken by a health care institution and can increase the organization’s

notoriety. Building a brand for a hospital and managing its reputation are also two important aspects of public relations. Moreover, public relations can and must maintain a prosperous inter organizational climate – the relations with investors (fund raising activities), public authorities, nonprofit organizations and other similar institutions. Last, but not least, public relations deal with the internal dimension of the communication system. Members of the system who are happy and satisfied with the organization they work for are the best promoters; word of mouth is a powerful communication instrument, as the social proof theory demonstrates: “one means we use to determine what is correct is to find out what other people think is correct. [...] We view a behavior as more correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it”.

The essential role of public relations, beyond all of the things mentioned above is to provide information about an institution, in order for the public to understand its mission and values and, eventually, to come to support and believe in those values and principles. The PR department, or the PR specialist, has the mission to convey messages coming from the organization to its specific publics and to persuade these audiences of the institution’s legitimacy. Advertising, or in this case PR, has the role to explain a product, to accompany the recipient in his path from learning through adhesion, while always being available to provide further information.

To summarize things, we will subscribe to George David’s statement, who believes there are three major activity areas for a PR practitioner: internal communication, community relations (in order to gain the trust and support of authorities, neighbors, sponsors, etc.) and media relations (especially because mass media has an impact of a wide audience). Furthermore, as a part of the management, public relations imply responsibility and understanding the stability of politics and information, in order to reach the organization’s most noble interests and those of its publics.

As a partial conclusion, public relations are, on one hand, means of persuasion, and, on the other hand, public relations are powerful information tools. Information and persuasion are what hospitals need in order to gain the trust of their patients. Transparency, professionalism, trustworthiness, safety, constant self improvement and development, friendliness are just some of the most important concepts that should define the image of a hospital. Public relations, as we demonstrated previously, provide the key to achieving this goal.

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2. Who are the target audiences for a hospital?

As we stated before, people don’t go to hospitals because they want to, but because they need to. And, unfortunately, there is no differentiation by age, sex or social status. At some point in our lives we all need medical care. Therefore, the communication strategy for a hospital should be a comprehensive one, in order to convey the message of the institution to all these different target audiences. Also, beyond the actual patients, another target audience is constituted by the family members and close relatives of the ones who need medical care. Local and national authorities are also included in the audience list, as well as nonprofit organizations. Another extremely important public is made up by possible investors and sponsors who can provide vital financial resources. Mass media can be considered also a target public and maintain a good relationship with representatives of the press is important for the maintenance of a good image.

3. Is there a need to build a brand for a hospital?

The answer to this question is undoubtedly yes. Whether we are talking about a state hospital or a private clinic, the need for people to know who you are and, most importantly, that you can be trusted, as an organization, is vital. A coherent brand image can provide both recognition and notoriety, but also it can give credibility and can create a climate of trust between the organization and the individual. Cristina Coman states\(^6\) that each organization has a distinct personality and it develops in a specific environment. This is an important aspect for every attempt to build a brand. The individuality of an organization, in this case of a hospital, can be exploited in order to create a brand.

Branding is not limited to the commercial activities. We live in a world where opera ensembles, orchestras, nonprofit organizations, universities, film companies and sport clubs are brands. Also, in this global and fragmented era nations and cities are implementing branding programs for stimulating self esteem, for cultivating the spirit of the place and for attracting tourists and investors\(^7\). The same principle can be applied in the case of a hospital: a branding strategy will, on the long term, provide more patients and, if we are to speak from a commercial perspective, more funds.

Hospitals and health care institutions are not very distinct one from another, in the aspect of rational factors: quality, price, services. The potential “client” will chose one organization or the other because of emotional factors – loyalty, commitment: “but I think we need to let people know we’re going to be here for you and take care of you and at the same time we’re going to take personal responsibility for your health”, Millie Swan says in an interview\(^8\).

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\(^8\) Elizabeth Kirkland, *art. cit*, p. 22.
The fundamental idea of a brand is that an organization has to project a coherent image, about itself and its goals. This consistency derives from the organization’s vision and its essence.

There are a lot of aspects concerning the brand strategy that will not be discussed in this paper. While building a brand one most take in consideration a lot of aspects: visual identity, positioning, brand awareness, implementing the brand strategy and so on. However, this article, as we stated before, does not provide the space for such an elaborate discussion. We will settle for emphasizing some of the key points regarding the PR activities that can prove to be useful for health care institutions.

4. How can public relations help hospitals while dealing with a crisis?
In order to build a positive image, an organization should act, not react. It should be the one setting the trends, not the one following them. There are certain situations, though, when an organization is forced to react to some exterior factors. Public relations function like a shield against events that can permanently damage the image of an organization. In the case of hospitals, there is always the danger of something going wrong: a malpraxis case, medical mistakes, epidemics, etc. If not handled properly, a crisis can destroy the image of an organization, especially if media gets involved. Trust is not easily gained, especially when people put their lives in the hands of an organization. Therefore, there should always be a crisis management plan that has the purpose to minimize loss, whether we are talking about financial or image damage. Arlette Bouzon defines crisis communication as the ensemble of actions that accompany the crisis, before, after or during the crisis. If there are signs that foresee a crisis, communication has the role to disarm it or to restrain it\(^9\). (Bouzon, 2006: 91)
According to Cristina Coman there a four stages of planning crisis communication: risk evaluation, a crisis plan that targets all the organization’s audiences, the actual implementation and damage control\(^10\).

Probably the most important aspect of crisis communication is honesty. Honest information, given promptly will underline the fact that the organization is in control and that it can handle the crisis it is confronted with. If vital information is hidden from the public, rumors and false information can do more damage than telling the truth. If mass media gets involved, the stake is even higher; because it reaches a lot of people, media has the power to destroy the reputation and the image of an organization.

In the case of hospitals, there should always be a plan for negative events, because unlike organizations from other areas, they are more exposed to crisis situations. If an IT company launches a product that doesn’t work properly, it’s very unlikely it will make the front page of a newspaper. If people die in a hospital due to a medical

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10 Cristina Coman, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
mistake it is sure that the media will be all over the event. Crisis communication has this exact purpose: to prevent and to control severe damage to the system’s image. There are a lot of possibilities, of things that can go wrong, but a good crisis strategy should foresee as many as possible and it should offer solutions for a variety of negative scenarios.

5. The Romanian health care system

Hospitals and doctors in Romania, generally speaking, have a bad image. The health care system is flawed, the reforms are hard to implement and hospitals are confronted with severe financial deficiencies. The conditions in state hospitals are usually very poor, modern equipment is hard to acquire and the medical staff is not very friendly. Another severe problem the system is confronted with is the corruption of medical practitioners. Studies\(^\text{11}\) show that a large percent of the population has offered money or other form of bribery at some point to a doctor or to a nurse in order to get a better treatment, especially in the case of public hospitals.

Hospitals in Romania are not all capable of dealing with a crisis situation, as the case of the Giulești maternity proved\(^\text{12}\). In August 2010 four newborns were killed and eight others were severely injured in a fire started in the hospital’s intensive care unit. The hospital was not ready for such an event and the panic and chaos that followed proved that. At one point the parents of the babies did not know whether their child was in the fire or not. The information coming from hospital representatives was practically absent and the silence contributed to the general panic. There was nobody to talk to the press and nobody to give information to the family members. The lack of a prompt reaction only made things worse and because the media practically broadcasted the event live, the hospital’s image suffered a great deal. No matter how good the doctors are or how high tech the medical equipment is, the hospital will wear for a long time the stigma of the tragic event. Sadly, no one could have predicted such an unfortunate event, but the reaction of the hospital authorities could have softened the blow.

This is just an extreme example of the things that don’t properly work in Romanian hospitals. A more elaborate research is needed to establish and evaluate the exact situation, in order to take the much needed measures.

A health care reform is now in public debate and according to it hospitals would gain autonomy and independence. However, the legislation project is criticized by the public and whether it will be implemented is still unknown. The consequence of this fact is that public hospitals will suffer because of the lack of a coherent

\(^{11}\) http://www.manager.ro/articole/sanatate/studiu:-peste-trei-sferturi-dintre-pacientii-clinici-
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\(^{12}\) http://www.gandul.info/news/explozie-la-maternitatea-giulesti-patru-bebelusi-morti-
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image strategy. Instead, private hospitals that understand the patients’ need for good services and that are under pressure from their direct competitors will gain the people’s trust.

Conclusions

The use of public relations in the health care area is not yet common. But this does not mean it is not necessary. As this paper briefly shows, the need for a coherent identity is vital even in this domain. In the case of private hospital the stake is obvious: more patients mean more money, satisfied patients bring other patients and so on. Public hospitals, because they are part of the state mechanism should have a positive image, even though the financial resources for promotional activities come from public money.

In order to survive in this competitive market the management teams of hospitals need to understand that communication is the key for a healthier functioning system. Of course, this paper was not meant to extensively debate this subject. We have settled, for now, to draw the frame for what health care PR means, while emphasizing some key points of the specific public relations activities in this area, such as crisis management, media relations, branding, etc.

There are still some important dimensions that should be taken in consideration in future studies. One of them is the use of social media in health care and how this new means of communication changes the way hospitals “talk” to their patients: “while using social media – which updates instantly, stays online for the public to view and is never truly anonymous, since computers can be tracked down – is a powerful tool for those in health care to spread information, it is also a tool that should be used carefully to ensure patient health, safety and confidentiality are protected.”13 Another effect deriving from the new media is the increased user control – “users are given more control over the information explosion”14.

Public relations and health care represent a combination that will surely last. It will be interesting to see how it evolves and how communication strategies will be adapted to the needs of a health care institution, in order to get the message across to the public.

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