2011

Hospice organizations on the social media scene: benchmarking the uses and strategies of hospice organizations on the internet in 2011

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HOSPICE ORGANIZATIONS ON THE SOCIAL MEDIA SCENE: BENCHMARKING THE USES AND STRATEGIES OF HOSPICE ORGANIZATIONS ON THE INTERNET IN 2011

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by
Emily Tiller
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2007
May 2011

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ABSTRACT

As baby boomers age and the hospice industry grows to meet the demands for care, it is important that these organizations reach their consumers in sensitive and responsible ways. Building caring and mutually beneficial relationships with these consumers is important. Social media can give these organizations the platforms to build and maintain these relationships, but most of the hospice organizations in this qualitative study did not make good use of the opportunities online to relate to their publics. Using public relationships and relationship management measurements, this study monitored the online activity of seven hospice organizations. In general, these organizations under used all available media. Two hospice organizations, Alive Hospice and Vitas Hospice, most appropriately used the media to interact with their publics online.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The hospice industry is a multi-billion dollar industry in the United State providing end-of-life care to the sick and dying population. Hospice organizations offer both in-home and in-patient care, but traditionally offer less aggressive medical care to these patients. The focus of hospice care is caring for the patient and making them comfortable to improve the quality of the remainder of their life rather than curing them or aggressively treating their illness. As the industry continues to grow, baby boomers age, and the for-profit sector of the industry increases, the hospice industry is facing changes. Due to the sensitivity of this line of medical work, the Internet and social media offer hospice organizations many benefits as they reach out through direct-to-consumer avenues. Using the Internet and social media offer hospice organizations a way to: "centralize communications, discover more cost effective ways to drive revenue, build a company knowledge base, collaborate more effectively, leverage staff and customers in new ways, drive traffic and increase leads and enhance recruiting efforts" (Care Networks a, 2011, para. 3).

This study uses qualitative analysis to examine the uses of social networking and online word-of-mouth marketing to build relationships among consumers of hospice organization's services. An analysis of how hospice organizations are reaching consumers through online networks explains how the correct use of social media can foster long-term positive organization-public relationships (OPR). This study uses public relations theory to gain an understanding and better explain this practice. Public relations theory helps explain how relationship-building techniques through social media can help foster positive relationships through certain measureable relationship factors. The desired result of this study is to analyze how hospice organizations are using online social networking capabilities to engage consumers

and build relationships. Additionally, the results of this study will provide best practice recommendations for hospice organizations so that they can make the best use of social networks to build positive and mutually beneficial relationships with their consumer base. This study provides a general analysis of where the hospice industry is in the adoption and use of online relationship management by the end of 2010.

Hospice organizations first appeared in the United States in 1970s. Hospices deliver palliative care to individuals who are approaching the end of their lives, providing them with services and medications to make them comfortable and increase their quality of life until it ends. Traditionally these organizations were set up as not-for-profit organizations, though for-profit hospices are growing at a faster pace and are becoming a more popular way to organize (Davis, Focus: *The Changing Face*…). Today there are approximately 5,000 hospice care organizations in the United States (NHCPO).

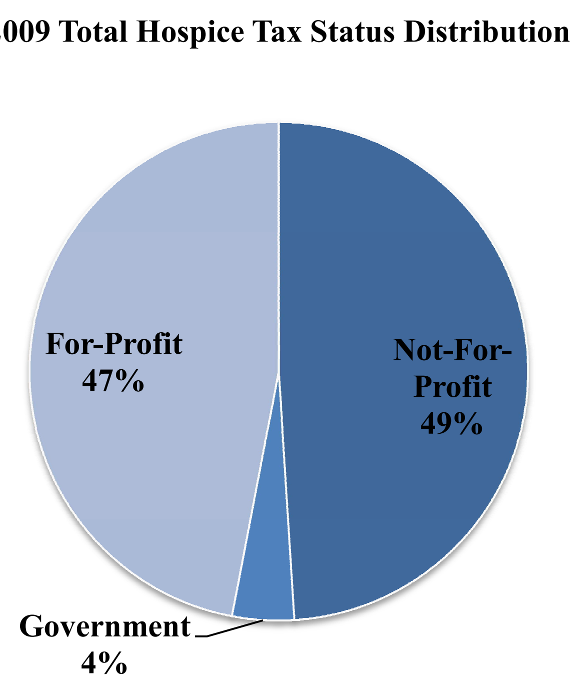


Figure 1. 2009 Total Hospice Tax Status Distribution (NHCPO)

According to the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, 1.56 million patients used hospice or other palliative care in 2009, up approximately 10 percent over the previous year. It was last estimated that approximately 41.6% of deaths in the United States occur under the care of a hospice or palliative care organization. Although the average days that a patient is under hospice care is about 69 days, the median is about 21 days. Studies have shown that hospice care can actually prolong a patient's life. A study done in 2007 showed that patients under hospice care lived an average of 29 days longer than patients who were not under hospice care. This study was performed per specialty and showed that patients with congestive heart failure lived 81 days longer; patients with lung cancer lived 39 days longer; patients with pancreatic cancer lived 21 days longer; and patients with colon cancer lived 33 days longer (marginally significant) (NHCPO).

Most Hospice patients receive care in their own residence, whether in their own home or in a nursing home. In 2009, nearly 54 percent of hospice patients were females. Less than one half percent of patients were less than 24 years old and less than one half percent were between 24 and 35 (NHCPO).

While most hospice patients are 75 and older, they are not the only target audience for marketing and public relations efforts for hospice organizations. While the consumers are usually elderly, Hospice organizations also treat children, teens and adults with life-threatening conditions. For all of these categories, the major healthcare decision-makers are spouses, parents, adult children, other family or friends. The Internet provides opportunities to target all of these different audiences directly and unmediated. In other words, Hospice organizations target family and friends of patients and this target is made up of different ages, races, socioeconomic statuses, and media habits.

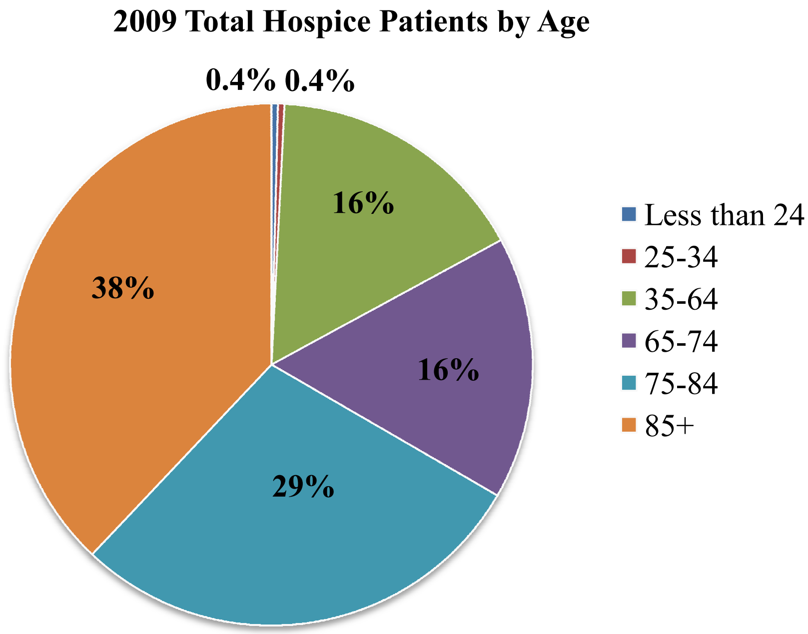


Figure 2. 2009 Total Hospice Patients by Age (NHCPO)

As most industries should be, Hospice organizations are learning and using social media. According to David Meerman Scott, author of *The New Rules of Marketing & PR*, public relations and marketing strategies have converged online and co-exist there. Specifically, these skill sets are no different online and do not warrant creating separate departments requiring different employees. He adds, “The Internet has made public relations public again, after many years of almost exclusive focus on media” (Scott 2010, p.11).

The Internet and different online activities are becoming more commonplace in all age groups in America. As of May 2010, 79% of all American adults use the Internet. Of this group, 61% use a social networking site such as Myspace, Facebook or LinkedIn. Seventeen percent of Internet users use Twitter. As of January 2010, Pew reported that 14% of Internet users were writing blogs, and 32% of Internet users were reading them (Pew 2010).

Scott explores the importance of these online media and social networking sites in public relations, marketing and advertising. “With social media,” he says, “we communicate directly

with our audience, bypassing the media filter completely" (Scott 2010, p.22). Online social has become a powerful tool for marketing or PR professionals, unmediated messaging to audiences.

Scott defines social media as, "Social media provides the way people share ideas, content, thoughts and relationships online. Social media differ from so-called 'mainstream' media in that anyone can create, comment on, and add to social media content. Social media can take the form of text, audio, video, images and communities" (Scott 2010, p.38). Scott says, "Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Myspace help people cultivate a community of friends and share information" (Scott 2010, p.37).

As communication technologies change for all industries, the authors of *Health Communication in the New Media Landscape* note that the health care industry has traditionally been slow to adopt changes in information technology. They note that baby boomers "are adopting technology mush faster than the next older generation, and they are expected to continue their technologically advanced behaviors as they age" revealing a disconnect between the consumer and the industry (Duffy & Thorson 2009, p.97). "Effective health communication today," they say, "must acknowledge the emergence of the powerful and technologically connected consumer" (Duffy & Thorson 2009, p.100).

The Health Communication Media Choice model reveals four communication needs: connectivity, information, entertainment and shopping. Connectivity refers to the need to engage and connect with others. Researchers also noted four universal needs that influence self-determined behavior: autonomy, competency and relatedness. Relatedness is the understanding that humans need to cultivate and maintain relationships with others, especially when it comes to health issues. This relatedness can result in exchange of information, making decisions, navigating health information, and anywhere in between (Duffy & Thorson, 2009). Social media

can provide the channel for industry to meet these consumer needs for connectivity, relatedness and more.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Organization-Public Relationships

In the past two decades the professional standards of public relations have shifted from a concentration on information distribution to building and maintaining relationships with an organization's publics. In Organization-Public Relationships (OPR), organizations use all forms of communication to foster mutually beneficial relationships between themselves, clients, employees, customers, or whomever the communication is targeting.

"The relationship management perspective fundamentally shifts the practice of public relations away from manipulating public opinion with communication messages… toward combining symbolic communication messages and organizational behaviors to initiate, build, nurture, and maintain mutually beneficial organization–public relationships" (Brunig & Ledingham 2000, p.87).

With the shift from emphasis on information outputs and outcomes, to a profession that focuses on relationship, it became important to understand how to measure outcomes of relationships. Measuring relationships helps answer the question, "How can PR practitioners begin to pinpoint and document for senior management the overall value of public relations to the organization as a whole?" (Hon & Grunig 1999, p.2). Measuring the value of relationships helps provide justification for the necessity of public relation professionals in an organization. It can also help save the organization money by "reducing the costs of litigation, regulation, legislation, pressure campaigns, boycotts, or lost revenue that result from bad relations… also helps organization make money by cultivating relationships with donors, consumers, shareholders, and legislators who are needed to support organizational goals" (Hon & Grunig 1999, p.11).

Relationship management researchers have identified four relationship factors and two relationship types as variables in building and maintaining positive relationships. Hon and Grunig's (1999) relationship measurement scale will be used. These researchers identify the four "Relationship Quality Outcome Indicators" as control mutuality, satisfaction, trust and commitment. Hon and Grunig (1999) also offer two relationship types: exchange and communal relationships. The foundation for dialogue, or two-way communication, can also be found in relationship theories (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Relationship Marketing

As public relations made the shift from outputs and outcomes to fostering long-term relationships with stakeholders, the field of marketing was taking a turn in the same direction. Relationship marketing (RM) is defined as "marketing seen as relationships, networks, and interaction" (Gummesson, 1994). Gronroos (1994) also defines RM as, in a near parallel to the objectives of OPR, something that enhances relationships with customers so that there is some mutual benefit to both parties. He specifically refers to the exchange and fulfillment of promises.

RM is a trend in marketing that, just like in public relations, recognizes that the process is more important than the outcome and that the customer's involvement in the process is a critical component to the company-consumer relationship (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). "An integrative relationship assumes overlap in the plans and processes of the interacting parties and suggest close economic, emotional and structural bonds among them" (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). They also note two shifts from transactional marketing to relationship marketing: 1) competition and conflict to mutual cooperation, and 2) choice independence to mutual interdependence. Finally, they state that to use relationship marketing effectively and efficiently, focus should be on

customer retention, efficient customer response, and the sharing of resources between marketing partners (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995).

Measuring Relationships

As explained earlier, being able to define and measure relationships produce justification for public relations and relationship marketing. Public relations researchers have focused on four relational factors: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment. Researchers have defined this scale as a way to quantify the quality of relationships (Brunig, et.al., 2008).

The scale begins with the measurement of control mutuality which indicates “the degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another” (Hon & Grunig 1999, p. 3). Most stable relations require some system of checks and balances where they “each have some control over the other” (Hon & Grunig 1999, p. 3).

Trust is “one party’s level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party” (Hon & Grunig 1999, p.3). Hon and Grunig’s guidelines highlight that trust is three-dimensional taking in to account integrity, dependability and competence. These three dimensions of trust are critical for public relationships and these attributes of trust should be communicated often by organizations, especially those in the business of producing consumer goods.

The third outcome, satisfaction, is a very important outcome for an organization’s customer service and sales. Satisfaction is “the extent to which each party feels favorable toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced” (Hon & Grunig 1999, p. 3). This outcome is fostered when the public feels that the positive aspects of the relationship, that is, previous positive encounters with that company through its products or

customer service, outweigh the negatives of the relationship making it worth-while (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

The final identified outcome is commitment. Commitment is “the extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 3). This outcome fosters a long-term relationship that is important for customers, clients and voters. According to these guidelines, commitment is two-dimensional through 1) continuance commitment, a certain line of action, and 2) affective commitment, an emotional orientation (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

In an exchange relationship, “one party gives benefit to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future” (Hon & Grunig 1999, p.3). In other words, exchange is a give and take relationship. In a communal relationship, both parties provide benefits to each other because they are concerned about the well being of that party, not because they are expecting anything in return. Achieving a communal relationship with an organization’s publics means that relationship will be strong, long-lasting, and will hopefully stand up to a potential crisis or reputational damage. Communal relationships are much more important and rewarding than developing exchange relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

In an attempt to refine Hon and Grunig’s 1999 study, Hon and Ki (2007) completed further research on the validity of a relationship indicator scale measurement. They found that “the influential order of relationship indicators is as follows: satisfaction → trust → commitment” (Hon & Ki 2007, p.430). Hon and Ki’s (2007) findings can help an organization in its first steps toward building, maintaining or repairing relationships. If an organization can foster a relationship outcome of satisfaction, that relationship has been shown to foster more

secure relationships through trust and commitment. Understanding how to measure or foster satisfaction as a relationship outcome is then, one of the most important.

Hon and Ki (2007) state that, “The most effective and efficient way to ensure publics of an organization's honesty, competence, and benevolence during the initial stages of the relationship is to provide publics with positive experiences and a sense of satisfaction” (p.431). Hon and Ki offer advice on the application of these indicators. Indeed, if the public knows that an organization is reliable, the more likely that this organization will develop more trusting relationships with its publics. Additionally, the public is generally going to be more satisfied with the organization, or person, if the organization displays a strong initial effort to meet their needs and will ultimately feel that the benefits of the relationship outweigh any potential negatives (Hon & Ki, 2007). Finally, all of these attributes assist in establishing a long-term, committed relationship that must be publically fostered by that organization (Hon & Ki, 2007).

Online Communities and Building Relationships

Online communities are the newest way to engage publics in consumer-organization relationships. Through online communities there are opportunities to engage in two-way communication that are not possible on company website or through e-mail. Relationships through these online communities can be very personal and regularly reinforced.

Social networking is a relatively new phenomenon online. Boyd (2007) defines social networking sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.”

Kent and Taylor (1998) were some of the first to study and propose a theoretical framework for the use of the Internet as a tool to build relationships through dialogue. They proposed that dialogue is the product of a two-way symmetrical relationship fostered through communication online. Dialogue can simply mean, "communicating about issues with publics" (Kent & Taylor 2002, p. 22).

Researchers have found three strategies toward relationship-building online: disclosure, usefulness and interactivity. The first is disclosure which echoes the themes of honesty and transparency. "For full disclosure, organizations must make sure to provide a detailed description of the organization and its history, use hyperlinks to connect to the organization's website, provide logos and visual cues to establish the connection, and list the individuals who are responsible for maintaining the social networking site profile" (Waters, et.al, 2008).

In further research on using the Internet to build relationships, Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) stress that websites should be useful and have an ease of use. "The most common forms of message dissemination include posting links to external news items about the organization or its causes; posting photographs, video, or audio files from the organization and its supporters; and using the message board or discussion wall to post announcements and answer questions" (Waters, et.al, 2008).

Finally, interactivity plays an important role in developing relationships online with stakeholders. Jo and Kim (2003) found a positive relationship between website interactivity and better relationships with the public. They also found a relationship between interactivity and the public's level of commitment to that company (Jo & Kim, 2003). Interactivity can include ways to sign up to receive company e-mails, donate online, and invitations to stakeholders to volunteer offline.

Measuring Relationships Online

Online media have created an abundance of new ways for organizations to build, manage and maintain relationships with its publics. “As Internet tactics continue to evolve and mature, it is important that public relations scholars examine and re-examine those evolving tactics for applied and theoretical insights” (Park & Reber 2008, p.410). Researchers Park and Reber (2008) applied an adapted version of Hon and Grunig’s relationship management measurement scale to Fortune 500 corporation’s websites. They wanted to investigate how companies were using websites to foster public relationships and if websites were being used effectively by organizations. They characterized control mutuality based on the dialogic loop, or the consumer’s ability to communicate with the organization via its website. Satisfaction was measured by the usefulness of information provided and the ease of use of the site. Trust was measured by the conservation of visitors and usefulness of information on the site. Commitment was measured by the presence and use of forums or discussion boards on the site. An exchange relationship was measured by the usefulness of information and the ability to recruit visitors to return to the site. A communal relationship was measured by information demonstrating an organization’s corporation citizenship, concern about society, and awards present on the site.

In a previous study, the researcher found that, to improve online interactions with audience members, organizations should increase its attempts to foster the attributes of trust and communal and exchange relationships. The same study also found that posts containing personal information had a negative effect on interaction with audience members. This finding seems somewhat contradictory. This finding may reflect that organizations should find a way to balance the personal story sharing, that may make them likable, with other attributes like useful

information, an attribute present in both the trust and exchange relationship concepts which were shown to foster higher audience interaction.

Recently, studies have also focused specifically on the social media platforms of Twitter and Facebook. Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) found that Twitter is not being used efficiently by organizations to build relationships online, specifically not using Twitter its full dialogic potential. In a study on how nonprofits were using Facebook, researchers found that these organizations were not taking full advantage of the tools that Facebook offers for the cultivation of meaningful relationships (Waters, et.al, 2009).

Studying how organizations are using and can better use social media to build relationships is an important area of research in communications right now.

> "Relationships are the foundation for social networking sites. Though no handbook currently exists to help an organization manage their social media presence, previous research on online relationship development offers insights into how social networking sights should be used to foster relationship growth" (Waters, et.al., 2009).

This research aims to address similar questions specifically for hospice organizations online.

Research Questions

Little research is available about relationship management online, but as websites, blogs and social networking sites become common fixtures in organization's communication strategies, it is important to analyze how the tools are used and how they can be used best.

RQ1: How are these organizations using social networking? (Interacting, disclosure, usefulness?)

RQ2: Which specific relationship factors are Hospice organizations communicating online?

RQ3: Where is the benchmark set in 2011 for hospice organization's use of the Internet in marketing and relationship building?

CHAPTER 3
METHOD

The exploratory nature of this study lends itself best to the structural flexibility of a qualitative study. Using qualitative methods, I analyzed seven Hospice organizations' use of social networking and other online media to engage and maintain consumers in positive relationships. The seven hospice organizations are a convenience sample of hospice organizations and represent both large and small, for-profit and not-for profit organizations, and span the United States in service area:

1) **VITAS End-of-Life Care** is a for-profit organization owned by Chemed, the same company that owns Roto Rooter. Vitas is the largest Hospice provider in the nation, providing more than 4 million days of care in 2009. The organization is in 16 states spanning from California to Michigan to Connecticut.
2) **Heartland Hospice** is a for-profit hospice organization owned by HCR Manor Care. Heartland is the third largest Hospice provider in the nation with more than 500 locations in 32 states.
3) In operation since 1979, **Hospice Compassus** is a for-profit organization that offers services in 14 states, including areas in Louisiana.

4) **The Community Hospice** is a non-profit organization based in New York recognized in hospice circles for its adoption of social media. Their service area encompasses seven counties in southeastern New York.
5) In operation since 1975, **Alive Hospice** is a non-profit organization based in Nashville, Tennessee serving a 12-county area.
6) **Canon Hospice** is a for-profit organization that services southeastern Louisiana and the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. Canon Hospice and its supporting Foundation also sponsor weekly radio shows across their service area.
7) **Hospice of Baton Rouge** touts it is "The only non-profit Hospice in Baton Rouge" and is the second-longest continuously operating hospice organization in Louisiana. This hospice serves an eight-parish area around Baton Rouge. In 2010 Hospice of Baton Rouge served more than 600 patients.

I chose these organizations based on their presence on social media (being on one or more of the platforms analyzed) and for their diversity of organizational structure and location. My intention was to find a range of hospice organizations in size, location, tax status and online activity. Vitas Hospice and Heartland Hospice appeared in a listing of large for-profit hospices. Canon Hospice and Hospice of Baton Rouge I knew about personally because they are local. I read online about The Community Hospice's efforts in developing an online community and about Alive Hospice's blog. I selected Hospice Compassus, because although they do have local connections to my area, they also service other states.

To answer research question two about the specific relationship factors that hospice organizations are communicating online, I analyzed content on all of the following online platforms: Twitter, Facebook, blogs, websites, Youtube and miscellaneous. All content for

analysis was pulled from the month of October. I selected the month of October for analysis because it is recent, but unlike November and December, it does not have a major holiday which could cause either a bust or boom in normal activity.

The overall timeframe for data collection was from October 2010 to March 2011. Data from Facebook, Twitter and blogs were captured in January 2011 through screen shots and saved in Word files. Websites, activity on Youtube accounts and the online community were analyzed directly from the website since there was no way to view archived information from October 2010 on these specific platforms. This data was accessed from January to March 2011.

To answer research question one, exploring how well these organizations are using social networking based on the standards of previous research, a qualitative analysis was conducted of communication tactics used in conversation with consumers on social networking sites, content on the organization's website, blogs, YouTube videos, and miscellaneous content. Each of the seven organizations efforts were analyzed separately in six categories: Twitter, Facebook, blog, website, Youtube and miscellaneous. Since this is exploratory research, qualitative analysis was used primarily, but some counting and frequencies were used to provide clarification on certain data.

There is a ranking for each category on a scale rating disclosure, interactivity, and usefulness (Waters, 2009). Each category is measured by a ranking of "low," "medium," or "high" based on their usage of the online medium to disclose information, be useful and promote interactivity. Low disclosure would indicate lack of information regarding who is controlling the updates or little available information about the company. A high ranking of disclosure can be attributed to organizations that sign employee names on tweets or Facebook posts based on who contributes them, offer detailed information about the company, and are generally transparent

about the goings on of the company. Low interactivity can be classified as the lack of available ways to communicate with the company and a lack of interest in beginning conversations with followers, friends or viewers. High interactivity offers multiple ways to communicate with the company and shows a general interest in communicating with those people connected to the company through social networks. A low ranking of usefulness indicates information that is not useful or informative. A low ranking of usefulness may be given to a company that focuses on distributing promotional information and rarely distributes news, tops, articles, or other more informative things. A high ranking will indicate that a company distributes a balance of informational items with promotional items. Medium disclosure, interactivity and usefulness fall somewhere in between low and high rankings, but cannot be classified as either.

According to its website, Twitter is a “real-time information network that connects you to the latest information about what you find interesting” (Twitter 2011, para. 1). Each post on Twitter, called a tweet, can be up to only 140 characters which makes the message concise. The tweet can also contain a link to more details about the post. Tweets indicate how the organizations are using Twitter to build relationships with their publics by engaging in conversation with replies or retweets. A general analysis of all Twitter organizations was performed on Twitter to attempt to create a benchmark for how Hospice organizations are currently using Twitter. I counted these organizations if they contained the word “hospice” in their name. I coded each Twitter post from the first week of October for relationship indicators.

Facebook is currently the most popular social networking site with more than 500 million active users according to Facebook’s Statistics page (2011), 50 percent of whom log on to Facebook in any given day. The average user has 130 friends. In general, people spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook (Facebook 2011, para. 1). On Facebook, users,

companies, causes, events and even celebrities can have a profile with information, pictures and more. Facebook users can connect by becoming “friends” and can also post status updates and write on one another’s profile “walls.” I analyzed Facebook pages based on their use of status updates, posts, links and more. An analysis was conducted as to how the organizations are using Facebook to build relationships with their publics by engaging in conversation through replying to questions, comments or concerns posted on their Facebook wall.

I analyzed the seven hospice organization’s websites based on the measurement scale that Park and Reber (2008) adapted from Hon and Grunig’s (1999) relationship measurement scale. Although websites are extremely common for organizations, some are better equipped to build and manage relationships with stakeholders than others based on design and content.

I analyzed the organizations’ blogs based on a combination of the two previous methods, identifying the type of information posted and the types of relationship building tactics being employed. Blogs have become increasingly popular because they allow unmediated, direct-to-consumer public relations from an organization to a stakeholder. Blogs are a large commitment for an organization to plan and execute, but if done correctly, can be a very powerful relationship tool because it gives organizations unmediated access to consumers.

Youtube.com is a website that allows individuals, groups or organizations to upload videos for public or private use. The quality of these videos ranges from videos shot with cell phones to multi-million dollar productions. I analyzed Youtube account activity for each of the hospice organization for such things as level of activity, number of videos posted, frequency of posts, and quality of posts. A miscellaneous section for analysis is designated if an organization promotes another social network that it is a part of, or if they have built their own online community on their website.

Operational Definitions of Relationship Indicators

As stated previously, researchers have identified four indicators of positive, mutually beneficial relationships that are key factors in building organization-public relations. Through analysis, researchers identify whether the tweet, post or text demonstrates the following relationship indicators: control mutuality, commitment, satisfaction, and trust. These operational definitions are derived from a combination of Park and Reber's 2008 study on relationship indicators on websites (Park and Reber, 2008) and Edman's 2010 study of Twitter and relationship building (Edman, 2010). Tweets, posts and updates can demonstrate one or more of the relationship indicators.

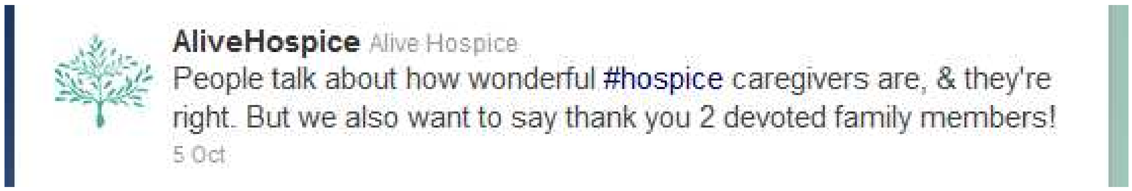
<u>Relationship Indicators on Social Networks</u>

Posts that demonstrate control mutuality will show a desire to create a conversation around the company or company products or services with the others. Control mutuality includes timely, pertinent, and authentic responsive discourse. Most replies or direct responses to comments on Facebook are categorized as examples of control mutuality. Posts that solicit ideas, information, or other feedback about the company or company products and services to users will also fit under this category because this gives the user an opportunity to make their experience with the company better. Only posts that relate to the company or company products or services will fit under control mutuality. Below is an example of a Twitter update that exemplifies control mutuality by speaking directly to another Twitter user:

Posts, updates or comments that demonstrate commitment will display a desire to foster a long-term relationship with the public. Committed posts can also try to provide useful information to consumers so that they will continue to build relationships with the company. Commitment posts can be answers to questions, tips, useful information, attempts to make the experience with the company better, affirmations that the company enjoys conversing with users, and more. These two Twitter posts from Heartland Hospice's parent company, HCR ManorCare show useful information relating to their audiences.

Text that demonstrates a desire to achieve consumer satisfaction is classified as posts that show satisfaction is an expected result of the relationship. Attempts to correct company mistakes, answering direct questions about the company, or pointing the user to the correct place for feedback will demonstrate a desire for customer satisfaction. A post or update involving questions about the structure of the company, Medicare reimbursement or other questions would demonstrate a desire to provide satisfaction.

Posts that show trust will demonstrate the company's desire to extend useful information to other users. These posts will show the competence, dependability, and integrity of the company. Posts that also include positive, casual conversations with customers demonstrate the company's attempt at achieving consumer trust. Below is an example of positive, casual conversation that may evoke feelings of trust from consumers.



<u>Relationship Indicators on Websites</u>

Indentifying these relationship indicators from websites can be slightly more difficult. As Park and Reber (2008) defined them, control mutuality is present on a website based on the consumer's ability to communicate with the organization via its website. If there are multiple methods for contacting the company, this demonstrates control mutuality. Satisfaction is portrayed based on the usefulness of information provided and the ease of use of the site. If a website has an updated news page, helpful information about the hospice industry, or tips for caretakers, these portray a desire to achieve consumer satisfaction. Additionally, the easier the website is to navigate, with clearly labeled buttons and easy to read text, the more satisfied consumers may be. Trust can also be achieved by the usefulness of information on the site, as well as the organization's attempts to conserve or draw visitors back to the website. Commitment to consumers is demonstrated on a website through the presence and use of forums or discussion boards on the site, and any increased attempt to build dialogue with site visitors. Exchange relationships can be classified on websites as both the usefulness of information and the ability to recruit visitors to return to the site. A communal relationship on websites is seen in information demonstrating an organization's corporation citizenship, concern about society, and awards that the organization has received.

To answer research question three about the benchmark in 2011 for hospice organization's use of the Internet in marketing and relationship building, I not only looked at these seven specific organizations, but also took a more general picture about what hospice organizations are doing online. Establishing where these organizations are now will help

measure growth and development in the future, and will also allows others to see how hospice organizations rank among other industries in the use of social network.

CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

In general, websites and Facebook are the most common forms of online media used by hospice organizations. A Facebook search for "hospice" yielded 271 hospice organizations on Facebook and a search for accounts on Twitter yielded 20 hospice organizations, excluding those that are located in other countries or delivering end-of-life care to animals. These organizations counted had the name "hospice" in their title. Entries associated with a specific event or those accounts that had no activity were filtered out of the search.

Table 1. Social media presence of the seven organizations studied.

Organization	Status	Facebook	Twitter	Blog	Website	YouTube	Other
Vitas	For-profit		X		X	X	
Heartland Hospice of HCR Manor Care	For-profit	X	X	X	X		
Hospice Compassus	For-profit	X			X		
The Community Hospice	Non-profit	X			X	X	X
Alive Hospice	Non-profit	X	X	X	X	X	
Canon Hospice	For-profit	X			X		
Hospice of Baton Rouge	Non-profit	X			X		

Overall Results

Overall, it seems that the size of hospice is somewhat related to activity online. Seemingly, the bigger the organization, the more active the organization will be on social networks and other online platforms. However, activity does not necessarily equal effectiveness. Alive Hospice, although falling in the middle of the pack size-wise, uses all of the platforms

most effectively, especially blogging. The smaller, more local organizations were less active online.

All but one organization, Vitas Hospice, are on Facebook in at least some form. Some were on Facebook in multiple formats, including individual profiles. These individual accounts may have predated Facebook's more business-friendly set up. In almost all cases, these organizations underuse Facebook and its capabilities. Overall, of the 28 posts analyzed from October 2010, only four shared useful information, information that is not promotional in nature, but is specifically helpful to the audience and capable of building a trusting relationship with the audience. Twenty-six of the 28 posts were promotional, meaning they were promoting the organization or an organizational effort or event. This one-sided, promotional communication is helpful in boosting brand awareness, and to some extent is necessary, but if overused can damage relationship-building efforts since there is little exchange involved between the two parties.

Additionally, while the organizations' Facebook posts were mostly one-way communication, they were able to communicate some important relationship indicators. While zero Facebook posts displayed control mutuality, many posts conveyed commitment (14), trust (15) and satisfaction (7).

Vitas Hospice (@VITASHospice), Alive Hospice (@AliveHospice) and Heartland Hospice's parent company (@HCR_ManorCare) were the only three organizations on Twitter out of the seven organizations reviewed. Not so different from the updates on Facebook, the organizations used their Twitter feed to announce promotional information about the organizations. All of the Heartland Hospice tweets and the first week of October tweets for Vitas and Alive hospices were analyzed. Seventeen of the 77 tweets provided useful information,

while 63 were promotional (some were both). While only four tweets displayed control mutuality, more displayed commitment (25), satisfaction (17) and trust (20).

As evidenced by the fact that only two organizations invested in blogging, blogging is time consuming and, in general, requires more resources to successfully manage than other online options such as Facebook and Twitter. One of the organizations, Alive Hospice, had a very well managed blog but did not receive a lot of interaction on their blog. Their blog was not cross promoted on their other online platforms. Heartland Hospice's Foundation blog was not updated or active and only had three entries total since August 2010.

In general, these organizations invested in their websites and all but one organization's website was well developed and had an updated, more modern aesthetic. Unfortunately, many of them failed to update their news page frequently with information about the organization or general useful information about palliative care, healthcare reform, or other topics. In general, they were user friendly. The organization's contributions to YouTube were mostly patient and employee testimonials. These videos were high quality and well made. Only one organization hosted its own online community, and that community is not as full functioning as some larger healthcare communities online.

As research has shown, there are three key relationship-building strategies for online communication or media. Full disclosure, which supports themes of trust and honesty, is when organizations provide a detailed description of the organization and its history, provide visual cues to establish the connection, and list the individuals who are responsible for maintaining the social networking site profile, and more (Waters, et.al, 2008). Usefulness is measured when organizations disseminate information including posting links to external news items about the organizations, posting photographs and videos, using the message board or discussion wall to

post announcements and answer questions, and more (Waters, et.al, 2008). Finally, interactivity plays an important role and offers opportunities to sign up to receive company e-mails, donate online, and invitations to stakeholders to volunteer offline (Waters, et.al, 2008) .

Overall, interactivity is extremely low. On Facebook, Twitter and blogs, comments and responses were minimal at best showing that there is very little conversation going on between the audience and the organization.

Table 2. Disclosure, interactivity and usefulness rankings by organization, by medium

Organization	Facebook			Twitter			Blog			Web		
	Disclosure	Interactivity	Usefulness	D	I	U	D	I	U	D	I	U
Vitas Hospice	NA	NA	NA	L	L	M	NA	NA	NA	L	M	M
Heartland Hospice	Low	Low	Medium	L	L	M	L	L	L	L	L	M
Hospice Compassus	Low	Low	Low	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	H	L	L
The Community Hospice	Low	Medium	Low	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	H	H	M
Alive Hospice	Medium	Medium	Low	M	M	M	H	M	M	M	H	H
Canon Hospice	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	L	L	L
Hospice of Baton Rouge	Low	Low	Low	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	L	L	M

Results by Category

For the purposes of this research, the seven hospice organizations studied are divided into four groups based on whether they are active on a particular platform, and whether or not they are using a particular platform effectively to build and manage relationships. The four categories are 1) active and effective, 2) active but ineffective, 3) barely there and ineffective, and 4) inactive and ineffective.

<u>Inactive and ineffective</u>

Some of the organizations analyzed were not at all active on social media. Even if they had an account on a platform, the organizations were not using the accounts. Beyond certain

aspects of their websites, these organizations were not making efforts to build relationships or interact with their audiences.

Canon Hospice is almost completely inactive online and had the least amount of content to analyze. Although Canon Hospice serves a large patient base through south Louisiana and Mississippi, they are not making efforts to reach audiences online. Their website is the most outdated, with little information and an outdated aesthetic. Canon Hospice's website may contain the least information of the seven organizations and is the least user friendly. This website has low rankings in disclosure, interactivity and usefulness for the lack of company information, methods of communicating with the organization, and useful information. The best aspects of the website are a decent list of employee contact information and an updated list of events.

Figure 3. CanonHospice.com homepage screenshot

Their presence on Facebook is almost undetectable. On Facebook, Canon Hospice has both a personal page (51 "likes") and a business page (four "likes"), neither of which have been active since August and July of 2010, respectively. There was not enough data on Facebook to analyze.

Hospice Compassus, though a relatively large organization, would also rank as inactive online. Hospice Compassus has a business page and 114 "likes" on Facebook. The organization has posted five times since joining Facebook in April 2010. Their last post on February 7, 2011 was a high-quality video explaining their operation. The video received three great comments, two of which were from current employees who are very enthusiastic about their jobs. Hospice Compassus could use these highly satisfied employees for their benefit as brand ambassadors to build relationships for them online.

Hospice Compassus has a website that is tailored to meet the needs of each of its targeted audiences: families, healthcare professionals, and volunteers and donors. This very distinct targeting allows them to tailor their web content specifically to the audiences and build very individualized relationships.

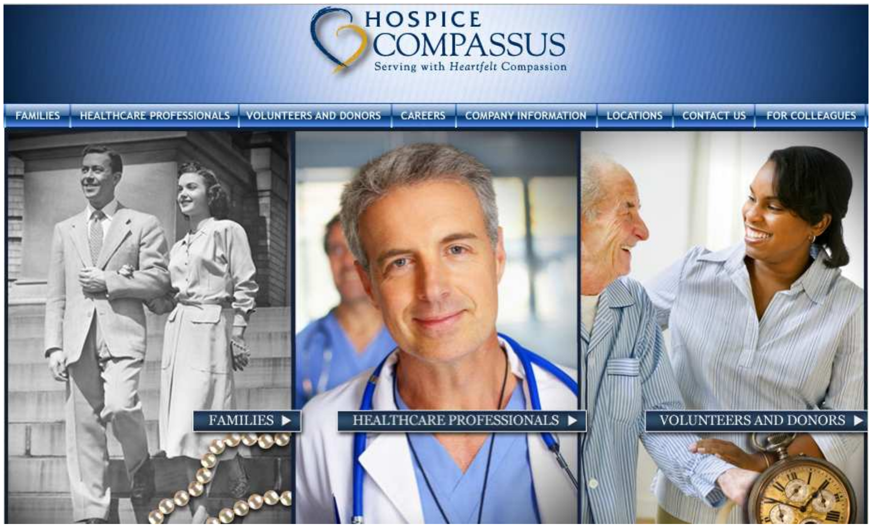


Figure 4. HospiceCompassus.com homepage screenshot

The website's section on "Company Information" is very informative and ranks highly for disclosure. This section of the website lists the company's values as regulatory compliance, colleagues and culture, quality care, service excellence, program growth, and fiscal responsibility. All of these terms portray trust and commitment to their audiences. The website

also displays a code of ethical conduct that is signed by the CEO of Hospice Compassus. Additionally, their contact page has an extensive list of contacts showing both commitment and communal relationship indicators.

Unfortunately, the news page on their website has not been updated since 2009. There is also very little generally useful information on the website, only specific information about the company. These are indicators for low rankings in trust and exchange relationships, where the company is not giving anything back to enrich the consumer.

Barely there and ineffective

Barely there and ineffective organizations are those that have made an attempt to be present on social media, but are barely using the platforms that they have joined. Having an account that is not run effectively can sometimes leave a worse impression than those organizations that are not at all present on the platform. For example, Hospice of Baton Rouge has an account on Facebook but posts inconsistently and the information is not well-managed.

Hospice of Baton Rouge is an organization that is barely there and ineffective and building relationships online. More than 150 people “like” Hospice of Baton Rouge (HBR) on Facebook. The organization had only three posts during October 2010, but HBR had the second most active page with status updates or pictures a few times a month. One post was the addition of a photo album from an event, one post invited people to the event, and another recapped the event, making all three posts promotional in nature. One post which demonstrated both commitment and trust was an event invitation, “Tailgate with HBR at the LSU/Auburn Game this weekend! 11-2 on the Parade Grounds across from the Bell Tower.” This post, at least, shows a desire to interact with and be available to their audience, showing commitment.

HBR's website targets three different audiences: patients and caregivers, donations and support, and volunteers. Of the seven organizations, they're the only site with a "donate" button prominently displayed on the homepage of their website. Besides the Facebook icon at the very bottom of the page, the dialogic loop is deemphasized on this site with a small contact button at the top and the phone number across the bottom of the page.

Figure 5. HospiceBR.org homepage screenshot

The website does tout, "The only non-profit hospice in Baton Rouge" which demonstrates aspects of a communal relationship. The company's values are listed as excellence, compassion, integrity, stewardship and teamwork. Commitment, satisfaction and trust are reinforced through language like this, "You can depend on HBR to do our best even when no one is watching." They show commitment to their community and communal relationship indicators by saying, "We are supported by our community and give back to our community."

Active but ineffective

Organizations that are active but ineffective online are present on social media, but are not using the platforms successfully. The organizations in this group are not using dialogue and interaction to build better relationships with online audiences.

Overall, The Community Hospice is active, but ineffective online. However, the company is making progress online and has the potential to become effective. The Community Hospice (TCH) had not joined Facebook in October 2010, but has subsequently joined and has increased its activity. TCH organization page had 18 posts in February 2011 and 51 people “like” them. They post photos, videos, event invitations and information about their organization. Their posts are not just promotional, but are also informative, like this one on February 13, 2011 that may build trust, “Under a new law in New York, physicians and nurse practitioners may now counsel terminally-ill patients about end-of-life options available to them. Such doctor-patient discussions would include the patient’s prognosis and the risks and benefits of the available options, including measures to relieve pain.” Reinforcing a communal relationship on Facebook, TCH reported both an accolade: “Hospital patients are accessing the services of Community Hospice right in the hospital. Last month we admitted 120 hospital patients as hospice patients, a 22% increase over last January,” and concern for society: a post about participation in a community health fair for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Health Month. The post on March 18, 2011, read, “The Community Hospice is participating in the LGBTQ Health Expo from 1-5 p.m. Sunday at the Crowne Plaza in downtown Albany. We'll be there to share important information about how we improve the quality of our patients' lives.”

TCH’s website ranks high in ease of use, disclosure and interactivity. As some of the buttons tell, TCH explains “When to Involve Us” and “How We’re Paid” which is high

disclosure and trust. TCH reassures patients, “What that means, if you’re a Medicare or Medicaid patient, is you don’t have to tap into any savings or pay any significant costs whatsoever when you choose to take advantage of Hospice services.”

The contact information is clearly displayed on the homepage, which is also an indicator of a strong dialogic loop and trust. The top right corner of the page has a place to become a member or where existing members can log in to the site which can support trust, satisfaction and commitment indicators by involving audiences.

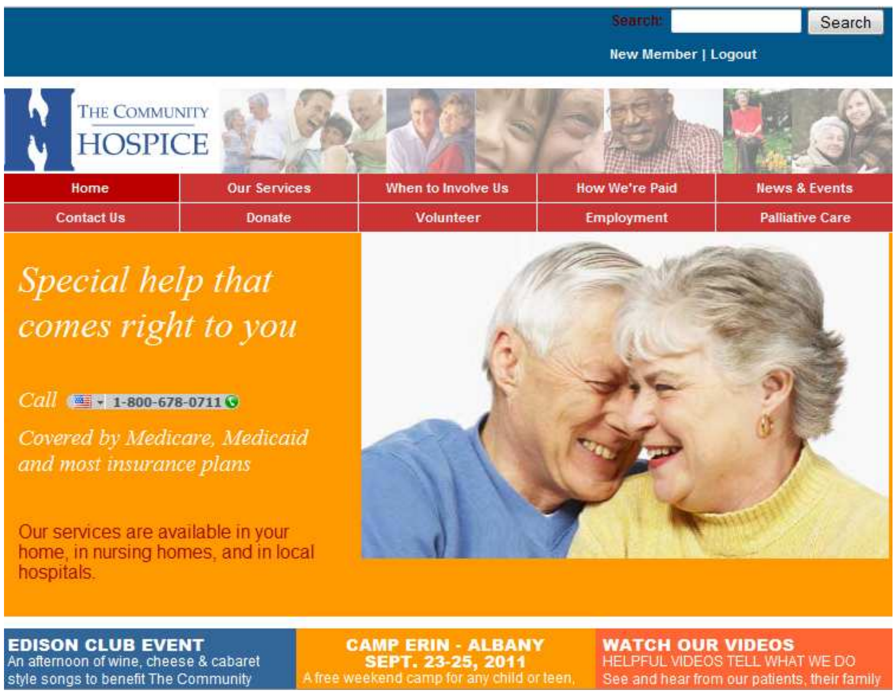


Figure 6. Communityhospice.org homepage screenshot

TCH is the only organization that has its own online community. Care Networks, a company encouraging and supporting home care organizations’ social media efforts, recognizes TCH for its efforts to build community online (Geyser, 2009, para. 1). Building a community online will lead to high interactivity, high usefulness, as well as the building of commitment, satisfaction, trust and commitment. Care Networks adds, “They also use video pretty effectively to promote their services through interviews of actual clients/patients” (Geyser, 2009, para. 1).

TCH has its own YouTube account, “AscenteMedia.” Ascent Emedia provides media support to healthcare organizations, and has supported TCH through their adoption of online media and social media. TCH joined in October 2009 and have since uploaded seven videos. The videos are all testimonials, some by employees, some by patients, and some by family members of patients. These videos have a total of 769 views.

Heartland Hospice itself is barely there, but HCR ManorCare, the parent company, is active but ineffective online. Heartland Hospice does not have its own business page on Facebook, only a personal page that is inactive. Heartland’s parent company HCR ManorCare has a local business page. The page is relatively new, and although has very few wall posts, has other features like “Welcome” and a “Health Tips” tabs. The health tips are a great way to share useful information to all audiences and are downloadable, which shows interactivity and is an indicator for trust and exchange relationships.

Figure 7. HCRManorCare Facebook Health Tips screenshots

Heartland Hospice's Twitter account is, once again, represented by their parent company, HCR Manor Care, from @HCR_ManorCare. They have been on Twitter since July 2009, have fewer than 40 tweets and 126 followers. I analyzed all of the tweets from the lifetime of this account, not just October, because there were so few. This Twitter account was the least conversational. Most tweets were about the company's past events, happenings at different locations, or links to articles. Of the organizations on Twitter, this account was the least interactive and useful and there was very limited content to analyze.

While only a couple posts provided non-promotional, useful information like "Dispelling Home Health and Hospice myths," most posts were promotional about changes or additions to the organization's location. For example, "Heartland of Oregon adds therapy gym, patient rooms." All of the organization's posts linked followers to other pages or news stories. Overall, this organization has missed opportunities to be interactive with followers. No tweets requested feedback from followers and none offered personal information (disclosure).

The Heartland Hospice Memorial Fund blog is specifically dedicated to updating the community about the goings on of the memorial fund. The first post of the blog on August 19, 2010 says specifically, "We will post recent news, program highlights, success stories, personal accounts and upcoming event information." Unfortunately, there are only two subsequent blog entries. Unless specified in the text of the post, the author of each entry is not clearly identified, giving the blog a poor rating in disclosure. The last entry on the Heartland Hospice Memorial

Fund blog was December 15, 2010. Of the three blog posts, two of the three demonstrated concern for society and corporate citizenship, and one prompted visitors to return to the site. While these are indicators of a communal relationship, exchange relationship and trust, there are not enough posts to draw conclusions about the relationships Heartland Hospice is attempting to foster with its stakeholders.


thursday, august 19, 2010

Introducing the Heartland Hospice Memorial Fund Blog...

We are delighted to introduce the Heartland Hospice Memorial Fund blog. We have created this communication tool as a way to share information about the happenings of the Heartland Hospice Memorial Fund. We will post recent news, program highlights, success stories, personal accounts and upcoming event information.

We hope you will join us in sharing the joy of the Heartland Hospice Memorial Fund. We have so many inspiring stories to tell about the peace and fulfillment brought to patients facing the end-of-life through this remarkable fund. Please follow us in our mission of hope.

posted by hcr at 7:29 am 0 comments

Figure 8. Heartland Hospice Foundation blog screenshot

Like in many other areas of the organization's business structure, Heartland Hospice does not have its own website but has a section within HCR ManorCare's website. When in the hospice section, the banner at the top of the page does change to represent Heartland, as shown in the image below.

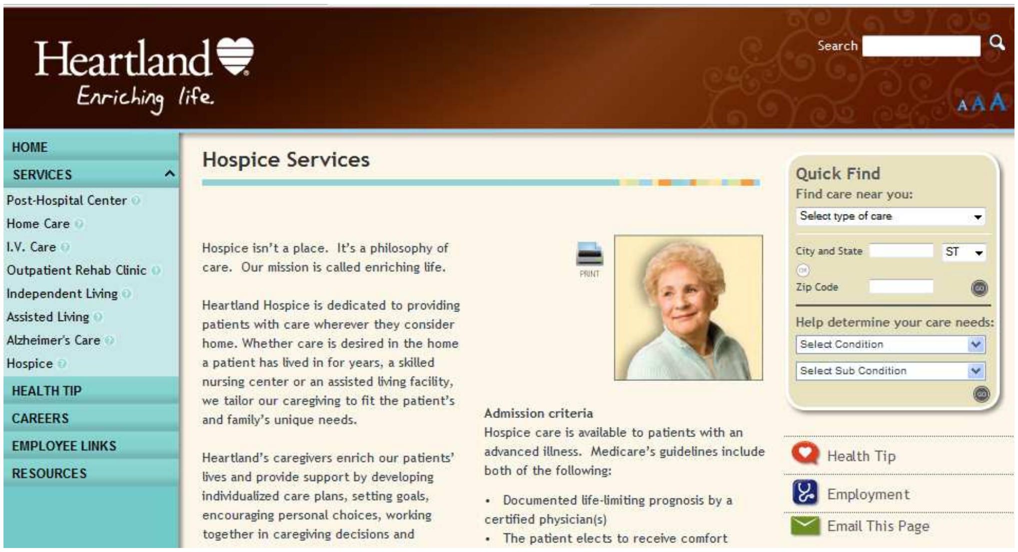


Figure 9. HCR-manorcare.com Heartland Hospice screenshot

There is very little relationship-building language used on Heartland Hospice's webpage. There are some efforts to show satisfaction and commitment in a section called "Success Stories." These testimonials by patient's families share experiences with Heartland Hospice staff during their loved ones' final days.

<u>Active and effective</u>

The active and effective group is categorized by organizations that are correctively and effectively using social media to engage and interact with their audiences, specifically for the purposes of building better relationships. These organizations are using one or more online platforms effectively.

Overall, Vitas Hospice is active and effective online. Vitas Hospice (@VITASHopsice) is not on Facebook, but has been active on Twitter since August 2009. Vitas has been relatively effective, even though they're only somewhat active online. Vitas has more than 1,400 tweets and more than 1,450 followers. Vitas offered useful information to followers, not just promotional messages. For example, "Recession drove millions to Medicaid in '09, survey finds"

and “A tougher stance on drugs hurts some nursing home patients,” linking followers to articles and reports.

While tweets from this account were not especially conversational, they were more conversational than those messages from other organizations. @VITASHospice often notified followers of upcoming events and opportunities for participation. Eight of the 30 tweets incorporated two-way communication.

The Vitas website is well designed and clean. The homepage touts, “The Nation’s Leading Provider of Hospice Service” and on other pages, “Pioneers in the Hospice Movement since 1978.” Sharing these accolades help support a communal relationship between the organization and the public. While the website does provide some useful information about the company, the newsroom is not frequently updated and the website does not offer much in depth information, which is an indicator of low trust and low exchange relationship.

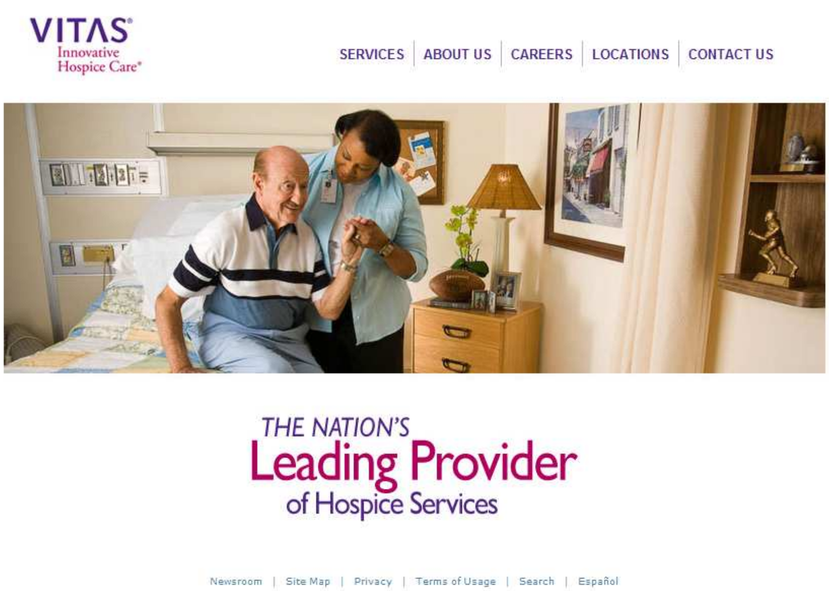


Figure 10. Vitas.com homepage screenshot

The locations page, contact us page and the ad for their Twitter does offer many ways for the public to initiate dialogue with the company, indicating a relatively functional dialogic loop, an indicator of control mutuality.

Alive Hospice is both active and effective online. Compared to the other organizations in the study, Alive Hospice has a very active Facebook account. All but one of Alive Hospice's 25 Facebook posts in October 2010 were one-way, indicating that the organization is missing a great opportunity to interact with Facebook users specifically the 433 people that "like" their organization. No posts demonstrated control mutuality, where both the audience and the organization can extend mutual influence of control over one another. While Alive dedicated most of its posts to promoting its organizations, 23 out of 25 posts were promotional, they did do a good job of responding to comments and questions on their posts and wall.

Thirteen posts emphasized the organization's commitment to its audience, usually inviting users to organization events. For example, "Middle Tennessee Nissan Employees: If you're attending tomorrow's Family Day, stop by the Alive Hospice booth and say 'Hello!'" Thirteen posts also demonstrated aspects of trust. For example, a post giving some personal information can help build a rapport of trust, like "Hospice supporter and Denver resident Dave

Miller has raised money for Denver Hospice while training for Ironman Triathalon in Kona, HI. He tackles Kona tomorrow and all of us at Alive Hospice wish him a great race!"

Only six posts demonstrated a desire to achieve satisfaction, or in this case, showing an interest in consumer satisfaction. For example, "The Alive Teen Retreat starts tonight. It's an experience that's designed to be fun, encouraging and uplifting. We hope they have a great time."

Alive Hospice (@AliveHospice) has been active on Twitter since July 2009. They have tweeted more than 1,200 times and have more than 1,000 followers. Their tweets were the most conversational, speaking directly to followers and asking them to visit, call or respond to certain messages. For example, a post that displays multiple relationship indicators, including commitment and satisfaction is, "Caring, dedicated family members are an important part of a hospice patient's comfort. Hugs to all family caregivers, past & present."

Additionally, providing "insider" information about the organization provokes trust, "Getting ready to hit 'send' on @Alive Hospice's October 2010 e-newsletter … #keepintouch #stay connected." Six of the 16 posts from @AliveHospice in October 2010 were attempting two-way communication, including two direct replies and one retweet.

Alive Hospice's blog had seven posts in the month of October. The blog post's authors varied from chaplains to volunteers to the CEO and were clearly disclosed. Although posts prompted little conversation, occasionally garnering one or two comments, the blog posts were well written and consistent.

Six out of seven of the Alive Hospice blog posts exhibited both concern for society and corporate citizenship, indicators of a communal relationship. Three of the posts provided useful information that can be an indicator of satisfaction, trust and exchange relationships. While the blog posts were beneficial to relationship building by containing one indicator or another, Alive Hospice blog could work to increase conversation with their readers by attempting to provoke discussion or motivating visitors to return to the blog.


Just a few more days 'til we're off and running!

18 Oct, 2010 1 Comment

Chris Felder

My good friend Mark has asked me to run in the Country Music Marathon each year since its inception. Each year, I sheepishly decline. I consider myself athletic, but I'm not a runner. Far from it.

So I've always turned him down, and privately I've always felt somewhat intimidated by the thought of training and trying to appear somewhat capable of crossing the finish line. A few months ago, I was at lunch with Pam Brown, Alive Hospice's vice president for community development, and she informed me that she's running in this Cookeville half-marathon for Alive.

She lit up when she talked about it, and the more she talked, the more I got this feeling that there's no excuse for not supporting a cause I feel so strongly about. "Man up," I thought inside. So I halfheartedly, probably under my breath, uttered the words "OK, I think I might try to run with you." (Key words here: "think," "might," and "try to.") I don't know my exact wording but I do know that it was certainly delivered in a matter-of-fact manner.

At that moment, I could think of of no better reason to overcome my trepidation at the daunting task of completing a multi-mile run than to do it for the organization that is closest to my heart. It was then I

Figure 11. Alive Hospice blog screenshot

The Alive Hospice website has very extensive information, including advance directives and downloadable brochures. The website has emphasized the dialogic loop, a strong indicator of trust, by connecting patients to Youtube, Twitter, Facebook, the blog and a contact us page.

The language on their homepage is very friendly, showing commitment to their consumers, "Alive Hospice serves patients and family members in equal measure. The agency's physicians, registered nurses, hospice aides (CNTs), social workers, chaplains and volunteers offer emotional support & compassion to help patients & their loved ones during one of life's most significant journeys." Additionally, in a section on values the website reads, "We believe in accountability to society, our community and each other." This committed verbiage also emphasis efforts to achieve communal relationships with audiences.

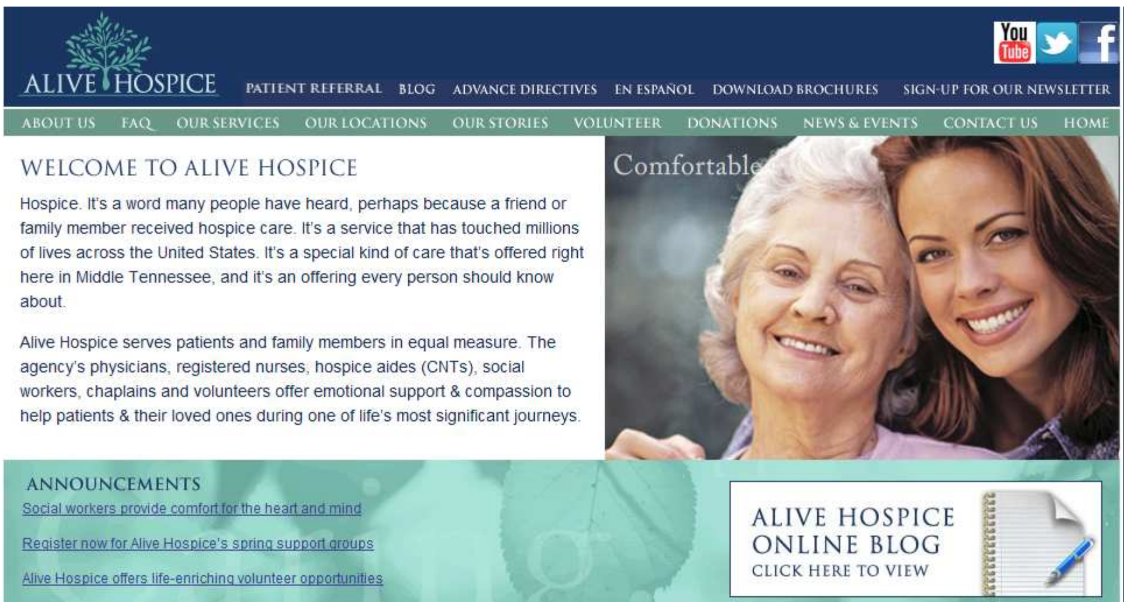


Figure 12. AliveHospice.org homepage screenshot

Alive Hospice also has a channel, "AliveHospice" with seven video uploads. Four videos are testimonials: two from nurse employees, one from a volunteer, and one from a patient's husband. The other three videos are live video shot from "Alive at the Bluebird," a concert series that is one of Alive Hospice's major fundraising events each year. Their videos have a total of 318 views. The testimonial videos really just explain what the company does. One video from the husband of a patient says, "You know, when you go through something, the main thing to me is caring. You can't hide caring… And you know if they care or they don't. I never once found

anybody that didn't care. I still haven't found anybody that didn't care. They're just a special group." This type of language can influence others to have trust in the organization, as well.

Results Summary

These hospice organizations are doing many things right online. First, they are online, a very important place to be in 2011. If nothing else, they are gaining exposure to some of the conversation around their organizations by being online and connected to social networks, even if they aren't using them effectively. Of the seven organizations I studied, Alive Hospice is the most active online. Alive Hospice has a well written and well managed blog with a diversity of voices. Facebook posts are current, Twitter sends pertinent information, and their website is clean and useful.

In general, organizations are missing opportunities to engage consumers in conversation on all levels and on all online platforms. There was also very few attempts to garner trust or exchange relationships by providing useful information. Efforts to achieve consumer satisfaction were also limited. Disclosure on social networks, interactivity on all platforms, and usefulness on all platforms must be increased to foster better relationships.

CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the adoption of social media becomes requisite for marketing and public relations practitioners, it is important that researchers provide organizations with suggestions for efficiency and maximum benefit. Using social media to build and maintain relationships with publics can benefit organizations for years in the form of support and resources.

Many hospice organizations are small, local, and primarily serve the elderly; therefore they have been late adopters of social media. Healthcare organizations, in general, have been late adopters of most new information technology (Duffy & Thornson, 2009). Hospice organizations have missed opportunities to reach out to baby boomers who are online and growing older, donors who are online and ranging in age, and family and friends of direct consumers who are online and who assist in end-of-life care decision making. By analyzing where hospice organizations currently are in the adoption of social media, researchers can make suggestions for improvement.

Hospice organizations serve a unique population – the very ill and their care providers. Hospice physicians and personnel are limited in the time available to spend one-on-one with each patient and his or her family. While nothing replaces the human aspect of service and caring, websites, blogs, forums, updates and posts can supplement conversations, brochures, pamphlets, and employees' time to meet patients' needs. Using inexpensive online platforms like websites, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter can make Hospices' resources go further.

Care Networks, the social media strategy and solution group that serves hospice, home care, senior living care, and more, recognizes why and how social media is important to hospice organizations, specifically. Care Networks website reads that hospice organizations target three audiences: patients, caregivers and family members, who are all dealing with different issues

surrounding end of life. They add, “Members of hospice communities need ongoing education and support to effectively cope with challenges and losses they face” (Care Networks b, 2011, para. 1). For hospice patients and families, social media can serve to “get informed about end-of-life care; access compassionate, knowledgeable caregivers; connect with others experiencing life-limiting illnesses; and get the support they need” (Care Networks b, 2011, para. 2).

Beyond these audiences, social networks also have direct benefits for employees and partners of hospice organizations. Use of social networks can aid organizations in both building better relationships with employees and in empowering employees online to help build better relationships with consumers. For internal hospice audiences, social media can “showcase their education, training and experience; contribute to the blogs and discussion forums; and answer questions, give advice, share helpful tips, and offer support” (Care Networks b, 2011, para. 3).

Outside of these external and internal audiences, there are additional benefits for hospice organizations online. In general these uses and benefits are to “showcase top caregivers and highlight exceptional staff; provide useful resources and social media content; keep family members informed and updated on the latest company news and events; join conversations, gain insights, and manage inquiries; and build better relationships with referral sources and partners” (Care Networks b, 2011, para. 4).

This study is important because of the implications of online relationship building to nonprofit organizations, but this study also reflects and reinforces many recent research findings. As found in a 2010 study of Fortune 500 companies use of Twitter, and echoed in this study, the principles of disclosure and usefulness of information are underused, but could be contributing to relationship building and conversation online (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). In fact, this study echoes many of the same findings. The general trend in social media is that these platforms are

being under utilized to create dialogue with their publics and stakeholders. These organizations on missing out on opportunities to interact online with their consumers, and missing the general premise of social media- connecting (Rybalko & Seltzer 2010, p.340).

Also as emphasized by Park and Reber (2008) is how critical it is to foster dialogue online. Doing so can produce long term, satisfying relationships with these consumers. The better these organizations understand the importance of creating and facilitating dialogue on their websites, Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, and others, the better and more effective use they will make of these platforms whose intentions are to promote dialogue and interaction.

In general, all seven organizations were attempting to engage their publics through social media, yet none of them used any form of online media to its full potential. Based on the analysis, these hospice organizations are missing out on the most important aspects of social media: engaging publics in conversation, garnering input and suggestions from audiences, and focusing on building relationships. In most cases, these organizations used online media to distribute promotional information, and that was all. While the potential to disseminate information online is great, it should not be the sole function of the online media. Hon and Ki's (2007) order of building a successful relationship should be analyzed by those organizations looking to build and manage successful relationships online. The study found that relationship building can be created in a progression from satisfaction to trust to commitment. In order to foster satisfaction, organizations should continue to share useful information, not just promotional information, with its audiences. Fostering satisfaction should be step one.

Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) also concluded their study with practitioner suggestions. They suggest:

> The personnel responsible for maintaining a Twitter account for an organization need to clearly understand their role as boundary spanners and how they need to adopt a dialogic

> orientation to Twitter use through seeking opportunities to engage in and stimulate dialogue with stakeholders. This necessitates someone monitoring the Twittersphere for mentions of the organization, its products, its services, and its employees (i.e., environmental scanning), and then taking steps to engage in dialogue when appropriate (Rybalko & Seltzer 2010, p.340).

Hospice organizations should work on *engaging* their audiences online, not just *talking to them*. When they are just disseminating information, their focus should be on providing the audience with information that is useful and applicable. Hospice organizations should offer more useful information to consumers, not just promotional information about their company. They should engage consumers in conversation. To strategically begin such a conversation, Hospice personnel should create an editorial calendar, or a content schedule, for postings and updates.

Additionally, as demonstrated in the example from Hospice Compassus' Facebook page, hospice organizations can make better use of their employees. Using current employees as advocates online, if they are well-managed, can be a fun and effective way to build both internal and external relationships for the organization. As mentioned earlier, these employees should be equipped to answer questions, give advice on problems, share helpful tips, and offer support to patients and caretakers (Care Networks b, 2011, para. 3).

Hospice organizations may be missing free opportunities to provide support online in an often difficult and painful time in people's lives. Online communities like CarePages.com and CaringBridge.org already exist to provide support for individuals and families encountering medical issues, even death. None of the studied hospice organizations linked to these sites. Linking and encouraging their publics to get involved on these sites could help the organization meet certain connectivity and support needs of these publics that they are not currently meeting.

As addressed earlier, relationship theories is foundational for dialogue, and dialogue, or two-way communication is arguably the most critical aspect of public relations. All of the

organizations studied could take simple steps to increase the use of dialogue on all online platforms. Small organizations, or those organizations that have small service areas, that are overwhelmed by or inactive on the Internet should strategically pick the forums that they are most comfortable with and the platforms where they can gain the most traction with their publics. For example, organizations that have small staffs may want to involve themselves on Facebook if more of their employees are already familiar with this platform.

Organizations that are not effectively using social media or their website to promote good relationships with publics should be better observers of those organizations that are effectively fostering relationships online. Even though all of the organizations needed to increase the use of these online platforms to increase dialogue, Vitas Hospice and Alive Hospice offer a great example to other hospice organizations. Following the activity of organizations that are already actively engaging online is a way to get ideas about post topics, style, interactivity, and more.

Limitations and Future Research

As with many studies, this research is limited in its generalizability because of the small scope of the study. While this study only took a snapshot of seven organizations, there are thousands of palliative care organizations across the nation and hundreds of them online. Also, since there is no way to archive websites after the date has passed, I am unable to say that the websites reflect what may have existed in October or any other month. In the future, it would be helpful to start collecting website screenshots farther in advance, to more accurately monitor the development of the website over time.

In future research of online relationship building, it would be interesting to study both the audience's perceived relationship with the organization compared to the organization's efforts to build relationships. I think a study pairing a survey with content analysis of an organization's

online efforts would help to provide validity to the measurements for online relationship building, as well as a clearer answer as to whether these researched relationship-building tactics are working.

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VITA

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