

Capitalize on Board Members' Untapped Skills and Expertise

BY RHODA WEISS

After conducting and speaking at more than 100 retreats for boards of trustees over the years, I have found that most health care organizations sorely underuse the skills of these business and community leaders in communicating with target audiences.

For Catholic health entities to succeed in the years ahead, they must engage these members in meaningful activities that can positively affect their institutions. Board members typically join a health care organization so that they can make a difference in the health and well-being of their fellow community members. But instead, many board members spend much of their time in meetings reacting to operational issues rather than getting key assignments that require their tremendous talents and rely on their vital community relationships. Developing this traditionally *reactive* position into a *proactive* position can have positive far-reaching effects.

Board members are usually willing and happy to take on strategic roles to improve their organizations' visibility, awareness, understanding, referrals, market share, and community support. *In fact, with their tremendous knowledge of the inner workings of the community, board members are well positioned to influence health care decision-making and ensure the viability of their organizations.*

Here are some examples of how board members can make a difference; consider implementing some or all of them in your organization.

Opinion Leader Briefings Ask board members to host a dozen or so community opinion leaders at their homes or places of business. During these sessions, executives and board members can describe the challenges and changes facing our industry—cost pressures, workforce challenges, government regulations, reimbursement difficulties, future trends, and other business issues. In addition, a panel of physicians can provide tips on healthy lifestyles.

Business Ambassadors Team board members with



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physicians to visit business executives and benefits managers of local employers to explain the issues facing health care in general and your organization in particular. Conduct extensive training to ensure these teams are adequately equipped to describe the challenges unique to your organization.

Contracting Participants Ask key board members to join your managed care executives during health plan contract negotiations to explain the hospital's needs from the perspective of business executives and community members. Trained and prepared board members can greatly influence the outcome of the negotiations and, in most cases, help secure a higher contract rate than previously expected.

Community Buddies Assign board members to be "buddies" to business and community leaders. Make them responsible for keeping in touch with their buddies on a regular basis, providing updates on the health care organization and inviting them to key health care activities and events. Buddies should also include new executives in the area. In addition, ask these board members to continually quiz their peer leaders to identify issues and concerns they may have with your health organization and how it can assist the buddy's own business with its health care needs and challenges.

Community Advocates Your board members typically serve on two to three other community and/or business boards. When their spouses are added, that number reaches five or six. Board members are also active and have held or will hold leadership positions in other organizations. Take advantage of these associations by asking board members to represent and promote your health care entity actively by communicating with and distributing materials on your new developments, events, and activities.

Executives on Loan Some board members may be willing to loan their human resource, risk management, marketing, finance, legal, or other high-level

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NET GAINS

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Extensive research can now be done with a few clicks of the mouse.

tion and databases to compare health plan rates.

- Older Americans 2000: Key Indicators of Well-Being (<http://www.agingstats.gov/chartbook2000/default.htm>) This site provides comprehensive information about the health and well-being of seniors. It features 31 indicators divided into five sections: population, economics, health status, health risks and behaviors, and health care. Information provided by the Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics.

- Trends in Health and Aging (<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/otheract/aging/trenddata.htm>) This NCHS site contains information on trends in health-related behaviors, health status, health care utilization, and cost of care for the older population at the national and state level.

WOMEN'S AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

- America's Children 1999 (<http://www.childstats.gov/ac1999/ac99.asp>) This site serves as an annual compendia of statistical indicators on the health status of American children, including data and summaries of key issues affecting their health. The full report is available online, and the site is sponsored by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics.

- Health Concerns Across a Woman's Lifespan (http://www.cmwf.org/programs/women/ksc_whsurvey99_332.asp#preface) This report reviews the findings of a national, multiyear study on the status of women's health. Topics covered include overall health status, access to health insurance, violence against women, and health status of lower-income women, with solid data and charts. It is sponsored by the Commonwealth Fund, a private foundation that sup-

ports independent research on health and social issues.

- Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth (<http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/hsp/98trends/trends98.htm>) HHS has placed online its third annual report on trends in the well-being of America's children and youth. Drawn from more than 90 indicators of well-being, the report is designed to provide policymakers, the media, and interested citizens an accessible overview of data on the condition of children in the United States.

CANCER SERVICES

- National Cancer Data Base (http://www.facs.org/about_college/acsdept/cancer_dept/programs/ncdb/whatsncdb.html) This site provides comprehensive cancer disease statistics by site. Information by cancer type includes patient demographics, treatment by stage, treatment by surgery type, and survival rates.

- Atlas of Cancer Mortality in the United States: 1950-94 (<http://www.nci.nih.gov/atlas/>) This online book from the National Cancer Institute provides maps, text, tables, and figures showing the geographic patterns of cancer death rates in the United States for approximately 40 cancers. The color-coded maps in the atlas make it easy for researchers and planners to identify places where high or low rates occur and to uncover patterns of cancer that might escape notice. □

CHAusa, the web site of the Catholic Health Association, provides a collection of Catholic/religious, government, and health-related links, with special focus on parish and long-term care. Go to <http://www.chausa.org/OTHLINKS.ASP>, as well as the "Advocacy" section of CHAusa.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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executives as professional volunteers who spend a few hours each month teaching, guiding, and advising on business and administrative strategies and techniques.

Mini-Medical School Ask board members to invite key leaders to your hospital to learn its inner workings both from the business and medical side. Participants can don surgical gowns for an inside look at an operation, go behind the scenes in the kitchen and supply areas, follow doctors and nurses on rounds, accompany the hospital chaplain during patient visits, and sit in on a management meeting.

Market Researchers Ask board members to participate in market research. This involvement can be as simple as surveying a dozen of their friends to identify gaps in the community's health offerings, answering questions on satisfaction with your organization's customer service, and learning your organization's strengths and weaknesses from a business and community perspective.

Board members can be a tremendous asset to your growth and success in an increasingly volatile environment. Ensuring that they are active participants in helping you reach your strategic goals is simple. Follow two words of advice from my mother: "just ask." □

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