

Market Program Boosts Staff Retention



Ms. Weiss is a Santa Monica, CA-based health care consultant and speaker.

Employee communications used to be relatively easy: Produce an internal newsletter, offer some bag lunches with the CEO, sponsor annual awards programs to recognize long lengths of service, and throw a yearly picnic for staff and their families.

But most leaders of today's health facilities realize that these activities are not enough to ensure that employees are knowledgeable, satisfied, and passionate advocates for their organizations. In health care—perhaps more than in any other field—staff members can have an especially powerful influence on their organizations' brands, reputations, and success. In many American communities, the local hospital is the biggest employer, or at least one of the biggest. Community members depend upon hospitals for jobs, good health, and life-saving medical procedures. And they also look to employees of that hospital for advice, referrals, and information about all aspects of health care in general and their own hospital in particular.

KEY MESSAGES

To ensure that its employees deliver a positive message to the public, a hospital should take care to see that they thoroughly understand and find satisfaction in their work. At the core of employee retention and satisfaction is comprehensive communications; an understanding and embracing of the organization's mission, vision, and values; a sense of "belongingness"; and responsive managers willing to listen, learn, and act upon suggestions and concerns.

This was clear to the leaders of Bayhealth Medical Centers, Dover, DE, a system that was formed in 1997 from the merger of two established hospitals. "Given the marriage of two cultures, management realized several years later that the organization needed to do a better job of speaking with one voice about the fundamental issues that impacted our ability to grow and serve

the community," says Marty Campanello, Bayhealth's senior vice president for planning and business development. "We needed to examine who we were, what we stood for, and the values and behaviors critical to our ability to thrive. In other words, how do we build one culture and speak with one voice while appreciating the differences among our hospitals?"

To address these concerns, Bayhealth in 2002 initiated a multiyear campaign to identify key messages that best describe its mission and the role its employees play in that mission. Along the way, the system's leaders learned much more than how to develop and deliver common messages about the organization, its purpose, and strategies. They also learned how to better manage their organization. Rejecting easy fixes, the system, Campanello said, launched a comprehensive effort of internal research, "messaging," and targeted interactions that eventually resulted in an internal communications plan with strategic messages and tools to "energize, involve, and align the many faces with one mission."

To ensure that communications were pertinent and shared across the system's various entities, Bayhealth designed a process to engage key stakeholders both in answering fundamental questions and in coming up with solutions. First on the agenda was research. Interviews were conducted with senior management, board, and community members. "We quickly learned that merger issues remained, including lack of alignment with our direction and lack of appreciation of differences between the hospitals," says Campanello. As a result of the input gained from the interviews, the system's leaders crafted initial messages in such areas as mission, behavior, and values. These messages were then tested in focus groups of physicians, nurses and other employees, and volunteers.

According to Campanello, feedback demonstrated that "everyone talked differently about

Communication Strategies

BY RHODA WEISS

Is it okay for the hospitals in a system to have different “personalities”?

Bayhealth in terms of mission and values. For the first time, staff wrestled with the issue of whether it's okay to have separate “personalities” at each hospital, but the same culture overall. All shared a sense of pride and seemed to want the same thing for Bayhealth—to offer the best community healthcare services.”

TOWARD A CONSISTENT MESSAGE

This unifying theme of “many faces, one mission,” formed the basis of the messages. Additional focus groups of internal staff helped finalize and validate the theme and the messages that would carry it.

Secondary research of local media revealed inconsistent messages about what the organization was. Even Bayhealth's own publications and marketing materials failed to offer a consistent message.

The system's leaders launched a plan to better define the mission, leadership behaviors, and values. Customized messages for each audience were created, as was advice to staff members on how to deliver these messages in the most meaningful way to staff. The launch activities and materials had several parts.

Vision Brochure The centerpiece of the launch plan was a brochure that clearly articulated the Bayhealth messages under its new theme, “Many faces, one mission.” The brochure included personal stories of staff, volunteers, and patients that helped put a face on each of Bayhealth's defined values. Accompanying the brochure was a pocket-sized card bearing the key messages and a “response card” on which employees could (anonymously, if they chose) provide feedback to the CEO on the brochure materials. The brochure was mailed to each employee's home. “Sending it to the homes of our staff made the brochure stand apart from other Bayhealth information received at the hospitals,” says Campanello.

Corporate Communications Manual Each supervisor received a manual containing the brochure, key messages tailored to different audiences, background information about Bayhealth, a list of facilities, an overview of its services, important system facts and figures, and the organization's standards concerning graphics for printed and online materials.

Message Meetings Senior managers and supervisors were invited to attend a leaders' meeting to learn more about the new messages and their development and about the leaders' own roles in reinforcing these messages with staff and demonstrat-

ing the organization's values and behaviors.

Leaders then held department meetings to share and reinforce the mission, discussing its relevance and applicability to particular departments and units. These discussions on mission have continued ever since.

Media Training Senior managers and key directors have continued all along to receive media training that will further reinforce the Bayhealth messages, preparing such leaders for speaking engagements at community events and with the media.

Follow-Up Survey The system's leaders conducted a survey nine months after the initiative's launch to gauge staff awareness and understanding of the mission, values, and preferred behaviors, as well as the staff's role in broadcasting the message.

Integration of Messages with Ongoing Programs and Activities The materials and messages continue to be included in employee orientation programs and have been integrated into Bayhealth's patient service program. They are now part of the rewards and recognition programs and staff performance reviews.

SPEAKING WITH ONE VOICE

Research has shown that the program intended to build a single culture and speak with a single voice has more than met its objectives. The first objective was to have 85 percent of staff understand all key messages; employee research revealed a 90 percent understanding. The second objective was to have 75 percent of staff understand Bayhealth's mission; research revealed that 87 percent of staff had this knowledge. Additionally, Bayhealth hoped that 75 percent of its staff would understand its values and preferred behaviors and their role in achieving the mission. The results in these categories, respectively, were that 87 percent understood the values, 79 percent understood the preferred behaviors, and 94 percent understood their role in achieving the stated mission.

“For the first time, Bayhealth management is aligned on its key messages and understands the critical role they play in bringing the Bayhealth vision to life and growing our hospitals, their programs and services,” says Campanello.

And that's not been the only benefit. Bayhealth's current employee retention rate is about 89 percent, with the regional average standing at 82 percent. Campanello attributes this success to the system's efforts in engaging staff to understand, embrace, and live out its mission and values. ■

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