



The Public Perception Project

A Research-Tested Way to Talk about the Ministry



Sr. Kathleen is executive vice president, Catholic Health East, Northeast Division, Springfield, MA; and Ms. Moseley is vice president, planning and communications, Bon Secours Health System, Marriottsville, MD.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Beginning with this issue, Health Progress's Communications Strategies column will focus on the ministry's Public Perception Project findings and uses. Supplemented by information on the CHA website, the column will be an avenue for information sharing about the integration of the project's messages and themes throughout the work of the Catholic health ministry.*

Sustaining strong public support for our organizations and our ministry is important both to our individual organizations and our collective ministry. We rely on positive community relations and favorable public opinion to achieve many of our goals and objectives locally and at the state level. And as a nationwide ministry, we also need to have public support for our initiatives around maintaining the strength and viability of health care as well as around creating health care that works for everyone.

As federal, state, and local decision makers contemplate policies that could have a negative impact on our ability to deliver health care services and on the ways those services will be paid for, it is important that we have public support for our facilities and the work we do.

We know from public opinion research that organizations can improve public opinion by clear communications that satisfy and meet public expectations and concerns.

This does not mean that we compromise or shade our basic principles or philosophy. It does mean we need to be effective in presenting our positions—or we will not meet our objectives.

THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION PROJECT

That is why, three years ago, Catholic health system CEOs endorsed the Public Perception Pro-

ject, or what we now call "P3." It was their attempt to take advantage of the vast communications and mission expertise of those who serve at ministry systems and facilities across the country, supported by the talents of CHA staff. The CEOs' goal was to find a new way to talk about the Catholic health care ministry, a way consistent with who we are and who we represent, while positively affecting public opinion.

As cochairs of this special project, we were pleased to serve with those 50-plus colleagues who joined us on the P3 Steering Committee and its four subcommittees. The final body of work produced by these groups relied on the ministry at large, encompassing the views of people representing large systems, small systems, and facilities of all sizes. Participants had expertise in communications, human resources, quality, mission, community benefit, and marketing.

The P3 Steering Committee and its subcommittees faced three central tasks. They had to:

- Review eight years of CHA-sponsored public-opinion research, including quarterly and national telephone surveys and more than 50 focus groups in 25 cities
- Develop a "message platform" from the data that would improve upon the already positive impression people have about Catholic health care (see **Box**, p. 8).
- Design a strategy to get this message platform in the hands of Catholic health care ministry communicators, educate them on its reasoning and necessity, and enable them to relay it to the internal and external audiences of Catholic health care

The members of the P3 Steering Committee and its subcommittees recognized that to improve public opinion, it is important that we, as a ministry, deliver a consistent message with

Communication Strategies

BY SR, KATHLEEN POPKO, SP, PhD; & PEGGY MOSELEY

one voice.

The public opinion research tells us that the overall goal the public seeks regarding health care is *quality*. The public believes that quality consists of four key building blocks:

- Appropriate treatment of medical needs
- Care delivered with compassion
- Good customer service
- Efficiency in providing services

BUILDING ON OUR STRENGTHS

The public already equates Catholic health care with compassionate care. While research demonstrates that there are some concerns about the religious nature of our facilities, and that giving special attention to persons living in poverty

might compromise quality, the public likes the notion that we care for people in a way that addresses the body, mind, and spirit.

As a result of this research, the Steering Committee and its messaging subcommittee developed the message platform displayed on this page. This message platform is intended to serve as the basis for how we talk about the Catholic health ministry. It is designed in a manner that will positively influence public opinion and be consistent with the mission of Catholic health care.

To share this message platform and the research on which it is based, the Steering Committee devised a toolkit in the form of a CD-ROM, entitled the *Public Perception Project*. In addition to the message platform and the

THE P3 MESSAGE PLATFORM

Category: *Quality*

Theme: Advanced technology. Highly trained staff. Compassionate service. This is how Catholic health care delivers quality.

Message Points

- We combine advanced technology and innovative treatment with a caring tradition.
- Doctors and other health professionals come to our (teaching) hospital(s) to learn and practice sophisticated medical treatments with compassion.
- We are dedicated to providing personal attention and care to every person, every step of the way.

Category: *Compassion*

Theme: Caring for each person—body, mind, and spirit—with respect and dignity. We listen. We explain. We serve with compassion.

Message Points

- Compassion is the foundation of all that we do.
- At our facility, patients and their families are people first and are treated with compassion, dignity, and respect.
- We attend to the needs of the whole person . . . healing body, mind, and spirit.
- We provide care that embraces a human touch.
- We are here when you need us the most.

Category: *Vision*

Theme: We work to improve the health status of the communities we serve and are committed to creating health care that works for everyone.

Message Points

- We welcome and respect people of all beliefs and traditions.
- We partner with communities we serve to improve health and quality of life for everyone.
- As part of improving the health of communities, we work to address the needs of those without access to health care.

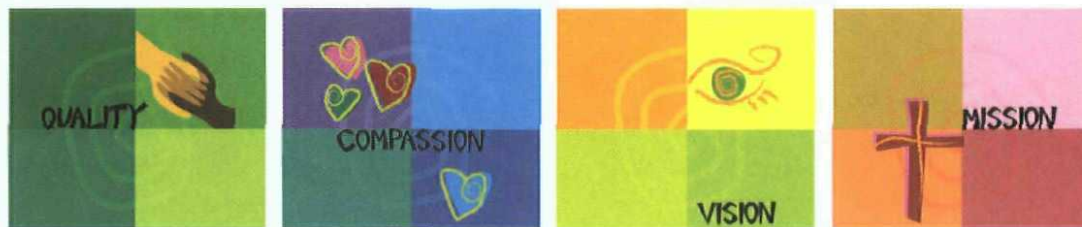
Category: *Mission*

Theme: Reflecting God's love, we are devoted to healing and providing hope.

Message Points

- God's love inspires our care for the whole person . . . body, mind, and spirit.
- We offer an environment where healing and hope can flourish.
- We cherish our tradition of service and caring.

Additional CHA member information, including a downloadable PDF document (in English and Spanish) regarding the P3 themes and message, can be found at www.chausa.org/Mem/MainNav/Initiatives/PPP/themes/.



research, the CD-ROM includes a series of tactics and strategies with which communicators can use the message platform in communicating with internal and external audiences.

The message platform is designed to be integrated into existing communications and marketing efforts. We wanted to make sure that utilizing these themes and messages was not viewed as additional work. In some cases, the action needed by communicators may be no more than tweaking a message that their own system or facility is already using. In other cases, communicators may need to integrate an additional concept concerning, for example, quality or compassionate care.

In the year since the toolkit was unveiled to system and facility communicators across the country, interest in the P3 resources has been increasing. P3 Steering Committee members have participated in numerous presentations and web-casts intended to educate the ministry about this very special initiative. To date, more than 1,000 representatives of the ministry have spent time learning about P3. These representatives come from varying backgrounds, including communications, mission, quality, planning, and marketing.

"SINGING FROM THE SAME SHEET"

The influences of the P3 message platform are beginning to show up in some of the advertising and publications by our systems and facilities. You can review some of these examples at our P3 website, www.chausa.org/Mem/MainNav/Initiatives/PPP/.

We have a great deal of work still to be done, and we need the help of all those in the ministry.

The message platform is designed to be integrated into existing communications and marketing efforts.

Only by "singing from the same song sheet" and speaking with one voice can we enhance the ministry's positive image with the general public.

The more the public appreciates Catholic health care, the less likely that public officials—whether in the halls of Congress, our state legislatures, or our city and town councils—will find a reason for imposing regulations or legislation that could challenge our ability to serve.

The Catholic health ministry is no different from the countless other organizations that need action by public officials to achieve their goals. Improving the public's understanding of and attitude toward Catholic health care is a challenge that we must meet to ensure support from public officials across the country.

The P3 message platform will help raise the appreciation and support of public officials and the general public for all the great works of the Catholic health ministry. Now it is up to all of us—no matter what our role within the ministry—to use and repeat these themes and messages again and again. ■

If you are interested in the work of the Public Perception Project or would like a copy of the P3 CD-ROM, please contact the CHA P3 project manager, Indu Spugnardi at ispugnardi@chausa.org.