

In Touch with Visitors

BY RHODA WEISS

Visitors to your healthcare facility may represent one of your greatest opportunities to generate increased visibility, awareness, and understanding of the organization.

Think about it: There are more visitors to hospitals than employees, patients, or physicians, yet little is done to market to this audience.

It is estimated that a typical 200-bed hospital welcomes more than 400,000 visitors through its doors annually. These numbers alone make a case for developing a visitors relations program. Such a program also makes it easier for visitors to access hospital services. Visitors provide perhaps the most inexpensive marketing opportunity for a hospital because related promotional activities usually cost little or nothing.

GETTING STARTED

How do you start? One way to begin is to create a visitors center. Locate it near the front door. Staff the center with volunteers and retired employees. Offer simple health screenings, videos, and health-related information.

You can also place your physician referral program in the visitors center. Statistics show that a large percentage of the U.S. population do not have a personal physician. Develop promotional materials that encourage visitors to select a family physician. Also, place health information and educational materials, pamphlets on senior and other membership programs, and class enrollment and screening activity forms in the center. Tell all hospital staff to invite visitors to stop by the center. Distribute cards there for free or discounted refreshments in the cafeteria.

The elevator is also an effective place to reach visitors. Place your already developed or new marketing materials—such as advertisements, flyers promoting community education programs and activities, and announcements of new services—in or adjacent to elevators. Hotels have used this strategy for years to market their services. It is an inexpensive way for a hospital to tell



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its story to thousands of visitors, in addition to its own employees, volunteers, and physicians.

STAFF EDUCATION

Those who greet visitors are among your most important marketing representatives, so train them in guest relations and educate them constantly on the hospital's activities and services. Periodically invite them to attend marketing and public relations staff meetings. Each week, provide lists, locations, and times of community education programs and screenings to information desk personnel (not only in the front lobby, but in other waiting areas as well). Encourage them to inform visitors about these programs.

Remember that your security force also represents a key opportunity for marketing to visitors. Go beyond the traditional orientation and train security guards in guest relations and marketing skills. Provide them with the same weekly lists of activities, hospital services, and programs. Invite them to your marketing meetings and make them part of the public relations team.

SPECIAL PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

Take the lead from Saint John's Hospital and Health Center in Santa Monica, CA, and distribute visitor guides to the hospital. On the front cover of the brochure, include blank spaces for the patient's name and room number. This will help visitors remember the room number and also serve as a helpful guide to your facility. Include such information as visiting hours for medical-surgical, maternity, critical care, and other special units. Give parking instructions, dining and cafeteria hours, phone instructions, guidelines regarding patients having surgery, rules for children who visit, procedures for voluntary blood donations, a map of the hospital and parking areas, and a list of volunteer opportunities. Also list your community education programs and special services. You may wish to include these brochures in your preadmission package mailings and have them available

throughout the hospital, not just at the information desk in the lobby.

Another service to visitors is to offer them written health risk assessments for such conditions as heart disease and cancer. Visitors can usually complete these simple tests in less than 10 minutes. The results can be shared with the visitors and their physicians. Some hospitals also place health-related crossword puzzles in waiting areas (with answers on the back).

For visitors with special needs, consider a visitors dinner program like the one at University Hospitals of Cleveland. This once-a-week special dinner is offered to the loved ones of seriously, critically, and chronically ill patients. The primary care nurse invites these guests to a dinner served and hosted by hospital staff, board members, and managers in a room adjacent to the cafeteria. About 40 visitors attend each week. During dinner, the hospital host at each table answers questions, explains hospital procedures, and conducts informal research to determine ways to improve patient care and services. Families meet others in similar situations and establish relationships.

CONNECTING WITH VISITORS

St. Vincent Hospital, Billings, MT, plays Brahms's Lullaby over the intercom every time a baby is born. The music raises the spirits of staff, patients, and visitors; helps ease immediate concerns; and places the meaning of healthcare in perspective. At Providence Hospital in Everett, WA, a large Chinese gong greets the arrival of every newborn.

Another visitor-directed maternity activity is the Love Light Tree appearing each Christmas at St. John's Hospital, Leavenworth, KS. Nurses request pictures of babies born in the past year, and volunteers create ornaments to hold photos on the tree. People throughout the area come to view this annual celebration of life.

A Christmas tree can also serve as a memorial to those who have passed on. Some hospitals use commemorative donations from family members

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and friends to create memorial ornaments with the name of the loved one.

Hospitals can also attract visitors by periodically hosting art shows from the community, an inexpensive alternative to purchasing works of art for the facility. El Pasillo del Art (the Hall of Art) at St. Francis Medical Center in Santa Barbara, CA, displays works of local residents and students for the enjoyment of hospital staff, patients, and visitors. It has long been known that art can assist in the healing process because of its ability to express the human side of life and to restore a sense of well-being.

The presence of artwork also creates a more pleasant environment. At St. Francis art has transformed long hallways from drab and lifeless to fun, interesting, and soothing or stimulating. Nurses say it motivates patients to get up and walk around and diverts visitors faced with long waits. El Pasillo del Art is open seven days a week, and the exhibit changes every two months. Exhibits have included pieces from elementary school students organized around the theme, "Things That Make Me Happy," and artwork submitted by hospital and physician office staff members with the theme, "Through the Eyes of a Child." "Grilled Cheese and Pickles" was an exhibit of pictures of children, taken by an operating room nurse. "Images of Earth" was produced by students and professional artists, who also conducted a workshop for students and the community at the hospital. An Art Cart provides patients choices of art to be displayed in their room during their stay.

STAYING ATTUNED

Hospitals that remain attuned to visitors' needs and concerns make a lasting impression on their guests. By welcoming patients' families and friends, offering them information about their health and healthcare options, and making the hospital environment more pleasant and attractive, facilities forge bonds that can last far into the future. □