

Eli's Hospice Insider

Referrals: Market Smarter And Grow Your Business With This Expert Advice

Sending out a nurse with donuts just isn't enough anymore.

If you aren't employing dedicated marketing staff, you're risking your hospice's future, say home care marketing experts.

"Selling and marketing home care and hospice is a necessity rather than an option," says **Michael Ferris** with **Simione Consultants**. "We have seen countless examples of fine, long-standing community providers who have been slow to embrace the concept and as a result have seen their census and revenues decline in a decade when the use of home care and hospice services have grown dramatically," says Chapel Hill, N.C.-based Ferris, who ran an agency in Houston in the 1990s.

Such providers "go from owning the market to a diminishing market share," Ferris cautions. "It may be fine to blame new competition or unneeded competitors, but only they can control how they nurture, protect, and maintain their precious key referral relationships."

Many home care providers refer to different types of marketing staff as liaisons (see related story, p. 68). "A home health liaison can be a wise investment," offers **Stephen Tweed** of **Leading Home Care ... A Tweed Jeffries company** in Louisville, Ky.

Leading Home Care's recent home health and hospice sales and marketing survey showed that the number-one technique for generating referrals that turn into admissions is "direct sales" to referral sources, Tweed shares with **Eli**. (Networking in the community came in number two, he notes.)

More than 85 percent of the 149 survey respondents reported using direct sales calls in their marketing efforts, Tweed says. And 78 percent of respondents said they employed at least one fulltime marketing staff person.

Ride The Coming Wave

The demand for hospice services is only going to grow in the coming years, experts predict. But you won't be able to capitalize on that industry growth unless you invest in a serious and effective marketing effort. "No matter what the post-acute space looks like in the future, if you haven't positioned your agency properly --" you will be left without a seat at the table," Ferris warns.

You should plan to dedicate resources to your marketing staff if you haven't already, but ineffective staff may not be any better than no staff at all. "To be competitive, you must have smart professional sales representatives," Ferris tells **Eli**.

"Properly trained home care or hospice sales professionals will grow the quality and quantity of admissions," Ferris continues. "Training and support are key to success; no longer can agencies just send 'marketers' out with muffins or donuts and hope that by making friends, they will grow referrals."

Smart marketing staff will use market data and their understanding of the rest of the health care continuum's needs to capitalize on referral opportunities, Ferris says.