

## **TOWARDS ENHANCING THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF HEALTH CARE INSTITUTIONS:**

### **A 12 POINT PLAN FOR ENHANCING THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF HOSPITALS**

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Managers of hospitals the world over more often than not lament bitterly about negative press coverage of their activities. Perhaps, the low coverage of the activities of health care institutions may be attributed to the fact that hospital managers do not have enough time to interact with the media on their activities. Lack of or no interaction at all by these two major players in the health industry probably is the major contributor to the negative image the general public perceived of health care institutions all over the world of which Ghana is no exception.

According to a research conducted in the U.S.A. in February 1987 on “Media Relations: Clues for Improving Hospitals and Health Services Administration”, most health care executives regard media portrayals of themselves and their institutions as negative, unfair and bias. By the same token, news executives also viewed health care professionals as inaccessible, excessively promotional, overly protective and above all arrogant of the media’s role in society. This is exactly how the terrain is today between the media and health care institutions here in Ghana.

In this 14-point plan of enhancing the public image of health care institutions, suggestions are made by this writer, adherence of which it is hoped can improve press relations and further boost public confidence and prestige of both health care executives and their institutions particularly those in Ghana.

Before looking at the 12 strategies, let us pause a while to analyze the role of the media and how they operate.

#### **THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA**

Historically, the media came into being to provide “checks and balances” to all spheres of man’s activities. They serve as “watch dogs” mandated to defend and protect the citizenry and this basically brought an adversarial relationship between them and the environments in which they operate. This adversarial process governs about 90% of what reporters do, say and write on issues, events and people. By their basic role, reporters think they can only keep going or remain in business by posturing themselves as adversaries of powerful institutions and personalities in writing their brilliant expose’ and bringing down a “fact cat”. It must however be noted that, in the case of health professionals and their institutions, even though they hold a considerable quantum of power over their clientele, the media is sworn to defend and protect them and as such will be aligning themselves more with them in their reportage .

## **HOW THE MEDIA OPERATES**

The cardinal principle for the operation of the media is their function of “gate keeper” system in journalism. This principle invests in the media a jurisdiction over the choice of stories for publication. The principle places more emphasis on human judgment over the newsworthiness of any story published by the media. Although there is no universal definition of what constitutes news, media practitioners the world over use at least 10 basic indicators in determining what should constitute news.

These include:

1. Prominence
2. Proximity
3. Conflict
4. Consequence
5. Impact
6. Tangibility
7. Change
8. Unusualness
9. Timeliness and
10. Human Interest

Even though these are inexhaustible the health care manager must be informed that, they form the bed rock on which the media choose a story suitable for publication and must as such be noted with all the exigencies they deserve. The more they appear to support a story, the alacrity with which the media will be pushed to publish it. If the media does not owe the health care manager anything to put into public domain what it thinks to be newsworthy, then utmost care must be taken in dealing with the media in ones everyday working life since the restoration of public confidence and prestige are the primary goals of the health care manager. It must again be emphasized that since by the very roles and operations of the media, they do and undo the health care manager by the kind of stories they consider newsworthy to publish, it is therefore worthwhile to adopt strategies that can confidently help in building a more beneficial working relationship with the media.

## **THE 12-POINT PLAN**

What follows is a comprehensive work plan to be used by the health care manager, adherence to which will enable all health care executives to improve their effectiveness and prestige and also help them bridge the communication gap between them and the media so as to minimize the negative impressions and perceptions the media had planted between them and the public.

### *1. HANDLING THE NEGATIVE STORY: AVOIDING THE “NO COMMENT” SYNDROME*

Reporters in their quest to satisfying the public in the news they make, will always go after Administrators, Physicians and hospitals. Some of these news items may be negative and damaging, others may not. Whichever way it is, the most effective way of dealing with the adversarial media is to be polite, pleasant, helpful and responsive. The reluctance in providing information to the media and the adoption of the no comment syndrome will compel reporters to go the very extreme.

Reporters by their training and experience are nosy, crafty and thoroughly accustomed to getting the information they want. So, if the source which should provide it fails, they rely on any source no matter how retorted it may be to make their stories. If an Administrator for whatever reason fails to provide information to a reporter, such reporter may mutter words to describe the Administrator for making his work difficult. The fact remains that, it is very unique to find a reporter who is a health specialist and more so to presume they will behave exactly like you. One lesson worth learning is that, an Administrator who hides information from the media will be in a rude awakening when the news package knocks at his door the next day with negative impressions.

By being helpful, answering all questions and volunteering information to the media, health care managers especially Administrators will avoid conveying the obnoxious defensive, tight-lipped stance reporters are so accustomed to equating with cover-ups. It must however be noted that, reporters will not create a subtle vendetta and suspect that the information given them is only a tip of the iceberg and thus begin to dip deeper into issues and events by any means foul or fair to make stories if the reception given them has the veracity to proof that after all “we have nothing to hide”

### *2. HONESTY SHOULD ALWAYS BE THE BEST POLICY*

Reporters in pursuing stories especially those in which it is alleged someone has erred usually expect officials to adopt “swept under the carpet attitude”. They may earlier on talk to others before getting to you. However, in the health care environment, it is common to see officials ignoring the media and adopting cover-ups in a bid to divert reporter’s attention. Such attitudes only serve to exacerbate suspicion. While it is not a good practice casting “whipping boys” to the press just like throwing meat back to dogs, admitting mistakes makes one more credible and thus turn to defuse any media efforts at exposing officials. There will therefore be nothing to expose thereof if officials candidly and openly admit that, they, their staff and institution are not immune to human error. Candor in the face of embarrassing revelations is the prevailing philosophy of modern men if ones dignity is to be maintained.

### *3. DO NOT EXPECT REPORTERS TO BE WELL PREPARED*

Reporters are not moving encyclopedia. Therefore, do not presume that even if you did not tell them anything, they will be on top of the story and project you positively. One cannot deny the fact that, most of the print and electronic media are understaffed and that one reporter may have to cover several stories in a day. They must also meet deadlines in submitting stories for publication. All these and many more make the news maker hasty and much unprepared and that given the leeway they will do their own thing.

Most of the damaging stories on health care managers and their institutions are attributable to the gross unpreparedness of the reporters and the laxity by health managers to feed them with information. The stark reality is that, most of these reporters are not sufficiently prepared and that health care managers especially the Administrator must always be on top of issues and be prepared to assist reporters in the making of their stories.

#### *4. DO NOT TALK OVER THE HEAD OF MEDIA MEN AND WOMEN*

It is very unique to find a reporter who is a health specialist. Reporters who specialize in healthcare reporting are very rare and can only be found in well established media houses. This implies that there are a lot of hybrid media men who do not know an ADC from a DRG. It is better to insult the reporter's intelligence than to let him or her walk away confused or with incorrect understanding, since what the reporter gleans form an interview is what will be passed on to the reading public. Always, consider an interview with the media as a platform to educate them and show that after all health care managers are knowledgeable and cannot be taken for granted.

#### *5. BE MINDFUL OF THE DEADLINE THE MEDIA MUST MEET*

There are two diametrically opposed views to meeting deadlines by the Health Care Manager and the Media. While the Health Care Manager deals with monthly, Quarterly, Bi-annually and Annual information in making stories and writing their reports, the media on the other hand meet hourly, daily, weekly and bi-weekly deadlines in executing their duties. Since the media needs its information quicker than the way the health care manager gathers it, a consensus must be reached so as not to endanger the Health care manager-media relationship.

The Health Care Managers should make the best effort to give the reporters the information they need. If the information will not be available within the time the reporter needs it, reveal this right away and suggest alternative ways of getting the information. By so doing one can exercise some control over the accuracy and propriety of the source.

#### *6. IMAGINE THE PERFECT STORY IN ALL YOUR DEALINGS WITH THE MEDIA*

Envision the way a balanced story on the subject in focus should be written and then give the reporter the information in that manner. Try to balance your comments since this is the ethical goal in journalism. Try as much as possible to counteract the notion that you are not a balanced person by trying to behave like the reporter.

#### *7. KEEP THE AUDIENCE IN MIND*

Health Care Managers must note that, reporters are and will continually sift through what their sources say, looking not only for what makes sense to his or her limited understanding of the subject but also for what will be most relevant, tangible and important to the audience. As a top –up to the ten aforementioned “news values”, it is prudent for all managers to keep in mind what will be most interesting and make most sense to the readers, viewers and listeners

#### *8. LEARN HOW THE LOCAL MEDIA WORKS*

Understanding how an institution operates is one way of meeting the aspirations and hopes of that institution. It behoves all to try to understand what reporters are looking for, how they piece together information and how they write their stories. Perhaps one way to do this is to read their previous scripts and listen to their broadcasts. Doing a trend analysis will help in understanding how the media in ones locality works

#### *9. PREPARE WHAT TO SAY TO REPORTERS*

Surveys have revealed that many Health Care Managers do not know what to talk about when they are being interviewed. This is very damaging and indicting. Preparing what to say to the media helps one to follow the reporter’s story and if possible write rejoinders. If you appear not to be prepared, reporters may force you to accept their views. They will publish things you don’t like to see and you cannot defend yourself because you cannot even remember what transpired between you and the reporter.

Conscientious preparation and articulate presentation should therefore be the yardstick of all Health Care Managers so that no media can take them for granted.

#### *10. PEAK IN QUOTES TO PROVE YOUR SUPERIORITY*

When dealing with reporters, try as much as possible to speak in quotes. Speaking this way gives the interviewee considerable power and absolute dominion over the reporter. It allows one to speak directly to issues than trying to be beating around them. The best way to speak in quotes is to anticipate the likely questions to be asked by the reporter and answer them before date. Keep such answers beside you during the interview period and refer to them when the need be.

*11. ALWAYS, REGARD INTERVIEWS AS OPPORTUNITIES, NOT CHORES*

Never deflect an interview opportunity to the Public Relations Staff or even a subordinate. It is unprofessional and simply not advisable. Even though responding to reporters' questions and demands are time consuming, the benefits cannot be over emphasized. Health Care Executives should always take advantage of interview opportunities and volunteer to be indispensable sources of information without which the reporter cannot make his or her story. The reporter therefore looks up to your information as the only credible one and will publish just that.

*12. PROTECT THE CORPORATE IMAGE OF WHERE YOU WORK IN ALL SPHERES*

There is no gain saying to point a left finger to your hometown here in Africa more so in Ghana. Every organization has its vision, goals, objectives, rules, guidelines, structures, policies, working manuals and other administrative and ministerial directives that culminate into its corporate image. In dealing with the media, one needs to be mindful of all these indicators in order not to plunge the organization into disrepute and public ridicule. Health Care Managers should therefore protect the corporate image of their organizations and the very institutions they serve. Such a behavior is not only a recipe for positive projection of the organization one serves but also a perfect ground for achieving the trust and confidence of one's employers.