

Moving From Healthcare Marketing to Workforce Development

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WILMINGTON, NC—Today, Eileen McConville is the Director, Workforce Development & Retention for New Hanover Health Network. Before June 2002, she spent eight years in the public affairs department, four of which were as the director of marketing for the institution.

Her evolution as a human resources professional owes a tremendous amount to her marketing background. As healthcare marketers become more involved in human resources issues, McConville's story may be of some interest.

Her entrance into the human resources world began almost three years ago when her CEO went to the vice president of public affairs saying he was becoming alarmed at the workforce vacancies in the hospital. "We were turning down cases," McConville says. How could the hospital and its various programs admit more patients if there was no room for them, he argued.

His vision was to take the skills of marketing and use them in workforce development. What do we need the most? We're getting patients almost by default. We weren't getting applicants for jobs," she says.

Working More Closely With Human Resources

McConville began working closely with human resources. Among the first steps were to create human resources advertising that fit closer to the institutional branding. "We ought to be able to have one ad that has the same touch, the same feel," she says. "One thing I had to do was talk about the importance of white space. White space is good. Employment ads traditionally had many words packed into a small space.

From May 2000 to October 2001, McConville worked with human resources to develop strategies for workforce recruitment. "Often human resources works in a reactive mode," she says. "There's a vacancy and human resources is contacted. We wanted to look at this more strategically and that comes from the marketing side." For example, recruiting would now be proactive. It would look at trends and then work systematically to appeal to qualified applicants.

One element of this was to make greater use of professional meetings and conferences. Each of the various nursing specialties has their annual get-together. New Hanover in the past would take a booth and be there. Under this new formulation, the effort would be more systematic. Ads would be taken in association journals right before the meeting. Direct mail pieces would go ahead of time to the attending nurses asking them to stop by the booth to learn more about opportunities at New Hanover.

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Another area she focused on was the overall advertising mix for job vacancies at the institutions. There was a strong culture in place in favor of association journal advertising for specific vacancies. That had to be dispelled. "We did an analysis and found out that only one percent of our applicants were coming from the journals and 20 percent were coming from the web," she says. "We were able to go to the managers and explain that and how much it costs to advertise in the journals. Plus, there was a lead-time with the journals. We would put a job ad online immediately"

Recruiting via the web can bring large responses. Because poring through hundreds of resumes can be time consuming, there is now recruitment software that can search all resumes for key words and phrases and only select those that meet these criteria out for further review.

“Healthcare has been behind other industries,” she says. “Most of your major employers use this. When we put it in, we were told we were only the second hospital to use this system.”

The Recruitment, Retention and Recognition Task Force

By October 2001, New Hanover’s CEO was still dissatisfied with the rate of progress being made on the human resources front. It didn’t do the hospital any good to bring in people in the front end if they were leaving on the back end. He created the Recruitment, Retention and Recognition Task Force and asked McConville to be the short-term chair of the group.

Among the problems they needed to address—employee satisfaction wasn’t very high. “They had the belief, ‘I need five more nurses in my department and I don’t see that you’re doing anything to get them.’

“We had to communicate with them. If people know what you’re doing, they’ll be pretty cool. From my marketing experience, I know the powers of communication.”

One hindrance to getting those new employees was the time it took to find a new employee. The healthcare organization was taking 104 days from the time the job was posted until the day the job was offered. With that long of a lead-time, applicants were dropping out in favor of other job possibilities. “We tripled the size of our employment division on a temporary basis to see what happened,” she says. “We were able to get the time down to 25 days.”

Altogether, during the year the organization was able to hire 1,150 people to fill vacancies. It was also able to reduce its turnover from 22 percent to approximately 17 percent. Communication with employees played an important role in this. From October 1, 2001 to July 1, 2002, the organization’s weekly employee newsletter featured 31 articles about what New Hanover was doing for employee recruitment, retention and recognition.

Moving to Human Resources Full Time and Using Marketing Skills

In January 2002, New Hanover’s director of workforce development left to work on consulting nationwide on this subject. The job was posted and McConville chosen among a variety of internal applicants. She began in June, “The first thing I had to do was learn HR law,” she says. “I had to know when to turn someone over to a HR professional. I had to know when something was over my head,”

An excellent example as to how marketing skills can be used in the human resources arena, McConville says, is a recent process the organization has been through with regard to health insurance for its employees. Quotes came in from the three carriers that were significantly higher than the prior year. Indeed, one insurer, the one that had the largest number of employees using it, came in with the highest increase.

What to do? Normally, HR might have simply made the decision on its own. Had the carrier been terminated with no employee comment, there might have been some backlash.

Rather, “we held focus groups,” she says. “We advertised this throughout the hospital asking employees if they wanted to participate. We talked at length with 110 people over one week and decided to drop insurer. We haven’t had anyone objecting to that once they understood how much it was going to cost them and how much it would cost us to continue with them.”

Another example of bringing marketing skills to HR has been the external advertising of

career opportunities. Wilmington is a large tourist destination, partly for its wonderful beaches. New Hanover now is advertising in publications seen by visitors to hit what McConville refers to as “passive job seekers.”

McConville is happy that the transition to human resources has allowed her to fully utilize her marketing skills learned from a number of years in the field. However, she points out, the new director of marketing does oversee New Hanover’s recruitment advertising, as she once did in that position.

A Unique Perspective

The East Greenwich, Rhode Island-based Carolyn Merriman and Brandon Melton are one of the few married couples in healthcare who can speak from many years of personal experience on HR and healthcare marketing issues. Merriman is the President of the Corporate Health Group, a healthcare consulting group developing customer driven strategies for the physician, employer and consumer markets. She has been in the healthcare marketing profession for two decades and is currently on the Board of the Society for Healthcare Strategy and Market Development. Melton has been in human resources for 30 years and is the Senior Vice President of Human Resources for the five hospital strong Lifespan. He is also this year’s President of the American Society for Healthcare Human Resources Administration.

They both feel there is a tremendous amount that marketers can bring to human resources. First of all, Melton says, “They can bring a sense of urgency and a knowledge of sales. For many years we in human resources have done things the old fashioned way. We just built it and expected candidates to line up.”

This was a successful model for many years. For most of the last 40 years, with the exception of the early 1970’s and mid 1980’s, there was a very good supply of talented people,” he says. “However, the labor shortages today are so deep and so prolonged that many say that they will be worse five, 10 to 15 years down the road.”

Merriman argues that marketers may find considerable satisfaction either working with HR on special projects or taking a job within HR to broaden their horizons. “We (in marketing) still struggle with being put in a public relations silo or let’s doing some more branding. It’s not as much outcome focused as it could be. There would be a lot of sizzle in HR.”

For one thing, there is the marketers skill in metrics. This skill can get a lot of use in HR. “You can measure how long it takes to fill a position and how much you’re decreasing the use of traveling nurses,” she says. “You can measure how much contract labor is costing you.”

Additionally, the marketers can get some solid operational experience and use this new opportunity as a way to move up the career ladder. Melton points out that in many cases the marketing budget may actually be less than the recruitment budget. At Lifespan, for instance, more dollars are spent on position openings than on product marketing.

Calling All Marketers

This past fall, Lifespan created a new position that demonstrates the transferability of skills between marketing and human resources. This position, Recruitment Specialist—Senior Marketing Officer reports to the Marketing and Communications Department and is solely focused on human resources work. Melton says that the organization is looking for someone with a sales and marketing background for the position.

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Among the duties: “Coordinates and implement market research to determine recruitment needs and interests in services and programs for assigned affiliates/services including, but not limited to focus groups, market data analyses, competitor analyses, telemarketing surveys, and Internet research.”

Additionally, the job requires the individual to “prepare

formal reports assessing effectiveness of recruitment tactics utilized, as well as customer satisfaction with plan/results... .”

This new job represents the proactive thinking that Lifespan believes it needs to fill positions rather than waiting for vacancies and then posting job searches. As part of this proactive strategy, Lifespan has put together a Recruitment Steering Committee comprised of nine people. Three of them are from human resources, three from marketing and three from line management.

Reversing the Flow

Well, what about the reverse? What might human resource professionals bring to healthcare marketing? After all, if it is established that marketers have something to offer as human resources professionals, it might be logical to assume that it goes the other way as well. “I think they bring people skills to bear, particularly with internal marketing to employees and internal market strategy,” Merriman says. “They also may bring some more tactical processes.” Plus, human resources individuals often are quite adept at working with the various departments within the hospital and that skill is something that can benefit the marketing department, she adds. ■