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Managing Word of Mouth for Organizational Success

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Of all the communication channels available to a health-care leader, informal word of mouth, both inside the organization and in the marketplace, is one of the most persuasive. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that for consumers, the top indicator of healthcare quality is something that is driven primarily by word of mouth: an organization's reputation.

Here is an example of how it can work:

Someone observes something you do, hears a story about your organization, or in some other way has an experience with your facility. If that person is at the hub of a social network, he or she will have several people listening when he or she talks about the experience. The word begins to spread from there. If the person has no stake in your facility, he or she will be seen as a credible source of information upon which others can rely. Further, someone telling a personal story can expand on your organization's advantages (or faults) when it would be bad form for you to do so. They may not get their facts precise, but through story and metaphor they will deliver with power the *meaning* of what is important. As a result, the attitudes and behaviors of those who listen will be shaped in a particular direction.

Now, replicate this micro-level process by the thousands of times patients are served by your organization's volunteers, physicians, nurses, and other employees. Add to this a healthy dose of the informal conversations shared among physicians, nurses, and clinicians. Finally, consider that informal conversations pierce the walls of the organization as these stakeholders interact with the community. This is the process of how healthcare corporate reputation becomes the "brand."

Because word of mouth is based so heavily on informal conversations and storytelling, it is the perfect example of a situation in which the command-and-control approach cannot be used. So is word of mouth something that can be managed at all? Yes—and it must be! Compare the small amount of formal communication that you control with the vast amount of informal conversations in and around the organization, over which you have less control. It's easy to see that managing the formal but not the informal conversations is a communication train wreck waiting

to happen. To prevent this from occurring, you must be managing both positive and negative word of mouth.

Managing *positive* word of mouth is not about control; it is about collaboration and managing influence. It begins by:

- Building trust at every level possible in the organization (this begins at the top)
- Ensuring congruence between what is said and what is done
- Being consistent and reliable
- Identifying individuals who are at the "hubs" of social networks in the community (these are the names and faces of individuals most likely to be active in building your reputation)
- Developing ways to involve these social network leaders in positive personal experiences with your organization
- Providing stories to these social network leaders that illustrate the organization's ability to accomplish its vision
- Encouraging those at the social network hubs to tell their stories

Managing *negative* word of mouth is more than merely correcting rumors and gossip (though this is also important). It involves *preventing* rumors by educating stakeholders' expectations before actions are taken, as well as anticipating what decisions and actions will appear inconsistent or confusing and providing appropriate explanations.

Whether you recognize it or not, as a healthcare executive, you are the subject of informal word-of-mouth conversations. This informal communication fills every corner of your career, the organization you work for, and the community you serve. It takes no vacation. Ignore it, perhaps—but at your peril. Hide from it you cannot. Manage it for your organization's success you can.

Michael E. Cafferky, FACHE, is the author of the book Managing Word of Mouth for Leadership Success: Connecting Healthcare Strategy and Reputation, published by Health Administration Press, and two other books on word-of-mouth communication. He is an assistant professor of business and management at Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, TN.

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