

## **Public Relations and Communication in Healthcare Facilities: Strategies to Enhance Reputation and Public Trust**

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### **Abstract**

Public relations and communication are integral elements of proper management of the image and reputation of an organization, such as a health facility, contributing to the cultivation of trust between patients and the healthcare system. Thanks to the development of digital technology, in particular, these possibilities have expanded, broadening citizens' accessibility to healthcare services, so that they are also addressed to younger ages, and allowing for a better understanding of them, the transparency of procedures and the fight against negative perceptions through effective practices. The current article examines such strategies of health marketing that can be adopted and implemented by various healthcare facilities to attract and care for new patient-clients, operating as organizations that combine entrepreneurship with a sense of social responsibility, aiming to ensure the provision of high standards of patient-centered services. Some of those analyzed and documented based on relevant literature are: a) the design of a methodical communication plan, b) the use of social media and email, c) paid advertising and search engine optimization, d) content creation, as well as e) influencer marketing, which can, among other things, enhance the reputation of units, ensuring their sustainability, build and maintain relationships of trust with the general public over time, and promote public health both nationally and internationally.

**Keywords:** Public relations; Communication; Healthcare facilities; Reputation; Public trust

### **Introduction**

Public relations and communication in the healthcare sector are fundamental elements of medical marketing to ensure sustainability of healthcare facilities, helping to build and maintain strong, long-term relationships of trust with citizens [1-10]. Their importance is undeniable, especially in terms of promoting specific health policies, informing the general public about issues concerning them and increasing their confidence in the care services provided [11-15]. Particularly in the modern age of ever-evolving digital technology and social media, the public image and reputation of individual healthcare facilities are directly affected by their effective communication with citizens, who seek easily accessible, accurate, comprehensible and reliable sources of information [16-18].

Furthermore, public relations contribute to, among other things, the demanding task of crisis management. In epidemics or cases of negative publicity, they help, through well-organized and methodical communication plans and other cam-

paigns, to counter misinformation and fear among citizens and to establish a climate of security in society [6,9,15,19]. Other strategies associated with advertising and digital marketing techniques discussed in this article, which can be combined, aim to strengthen the good name of healthcare providers and promote public health in general. Also, by adopting a patient-centered medical practice they demonstrate genuine sensitivity to citizens' needs and thus attract new customers [8, 21-24].

### **Communication Plan**

The integrated operational planning of a modern strategic communication plan is of paramount importance to the health sector, particularly concerning the effectiveness of the services provided and the sustainability of individual facilities [1-6, 13]. It has significant benefits, particularly in emergencies, which often require a multi-level response, making it imperative to develop well-targeted national communication plans. These plans include time-bound, measurable and achievable objectives, different outreach methods (e.g. press releases, social

media and briefings), and communicators and the messages to be conveyed, utilizing specialized practices, innovative strategies and technological applications [6,9,13,16].

The contribution of the CERC (Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication) model to the healthcare sector in terms of understanding and implementing key communication strategies in periods of crisis management, handling natural disasters or epidemics, is praised in the literature [19,25]. An illustrative example of a case study is Greece: in 2000, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the CERC model was used to guide public authorities on how to inform the population about the course of the disease and the proposed prevention measures. It was an effort to address fear and misinformation, as applied in the case of AIDS in the US during the 1980s [9,13].

Of course, the current plan must be adapted to the changing circumstances and needs of the community in each case, while the information dissemination process should be characterized by immediacy, good planning and transparency, however incomplete or alarming the information may be, in order to maintain a strong and stable relationship of trust with citizens [19,25]. At the same time, harmonious cooperation is necessary among different organizations and providers, in both the public and the private sector, at the national and international level to ensure effective and multidimensional communication. This ensures broader public coverage, implementation of coordinated actions and adoption of a unified strategy, and, of course, the protection of public health [19,25].

### Social Media and Email

Social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and X) can be powerful tools to enhance the reputation of healthcare facilities and increase citizens' trust in the services provided, in the context of public relations and communication [6,21,24]. First, healthcare facilities can post information on types of services provided, the latest medical developments, available treatments, and challenging surgical successes. They can also present testimonials of satisfied patients, cutting-edge technologies and a plethora of other innovations that can improve their public image and increase their credibility. Moreover, creating interactive content (e.g. questionnaires, surveys, live Q&A sessions with experts, virtual tours of the premises, etc.) can enhance interaction with the public and highlight the personal commitment of the facility to their health and wellbeing. These are all essential to attracting new customers, creating stable relationships of trust, and gaining a competitive advantage in the market due to greater name recognition [21,24].

An equally effective digital marketing strategy is email, which enables targeted communication with patients and other interested parties [16,21,26]. Forms of communication may include automatic reminders for scheduled tests or appointments, newsletters and educational messages or audiovisual material communicating offers, advice and information on disease prevention, nutrition, exercise, various vaccination programs, events, seminars and healthcare workshops. Sending surveys after appointments can provide valuable feedback to improve services and understand patients' needs and expectations. Such personalized information and communication promote citizens' trust in and engagement with the healthcare system, enhance user experience and increase awareness, as citizens feel well-informed on health issues [21,26].

### Paid Advertising and Search Engine Optimization

Paid advertisements are another easy and cost-effective way to reach the target audience, potentially ensuring higher user traffic and thus establishing the reputation of a healthcare facility [3]. Creating and placing targeted advertising campaigns in a highly competitive age requires a smaller budget and less investment in time, while their effectiveness in promoting the services and information provided is better guaranteed, attracting more customers/patients [6,23,24,27]. This strategy permits the establishment of a strong and recognizable image for healthcare facilities, a key factor in periods of crisis management, such as the AIDS outbreak and the COVID-19 pandemic, when ensuring interaction with the public and gaining public trust is crucial [9,13,16].

Moreover, search engine optimization is a beneficial communication and PR tool for healthcare facilities, increasing organic traffic on their websites, heightening their digital visibility and ensuring that they are ranked high in user searches [3,4,12,16,17,23,24]. This strategy involves using appropriate keywords relevant to the websites of interest and creating links to them from other suitable websites. It also aims to improve website structure based on digital tools, and to regularly create engaging content that addresses citizens' needs and concerns. Thus, providers are modernizing in order to effectively and transparently communicate their services and campaigns, informing the general public about health issues that concern them. They are broadening accessibility to include younger age groups, and building relationships of trust between healthcare facilities and the community [3,4,17,19,24,28].

### Content Marketing

Content marketing is considered a strategy of paramount importance, that contributes to the establishment of the good reputation of healthcare facilities and a strong relationship of trust between citizens and the healthcare system [2]. Articles, blog posts, educational videos, infographics, and other quality patient-centered materials on a variety of health topics (e.g. importance of screenings, treatments, vaccination campaigns, integration of innovative technologies, symptoms and progression of disease) make it easier to keep citizens informed. The dissemination of scientifically based and therefore reliable information counters misinformation and promotes public health [6,22,24,28,29].

Moreover, content marketing enhances transparency, increasing public trust. Healthcare facilities can publish part of their daily work, certain procedures and safety protocols, demonstrating that they operate ethically, with professionalism, integrity and high standards [16,29]. Interaction is also encouraged, creating open channels of communication with the general public to answer questions, while posting other patients' positive comments and experiences can have a positive impact on citizens' decisions [2,29].

Events such as free examinations and in-person and online training seminars and healthcare workshops offering certifications or certificates of attendance are also promoted to mobilize and raise awareness among the community, vulnerable population groups in particular, in order to project a positive public image of the facilities. It should be noted that these events also promote the training of the healthcare professionals themselves, broadening their knowledge and further cultivating

their skills. The benefits of content marketing can be summed up as provision of personalized care, better communication and collaboration with all stakeholders, optimization of health outcomes and higher levels of patient satisfaction [2,16,22,28,29].

### Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is another strategy with a significant impact on consumer behavior, precisely because the healthcare facility is also a business, which has to be sustainable. To this end, reaching specific individuals capable of positively influencing public opinion on the image of a healthcare facility is necessary in order to modernize and adapt to digital imperatives. Influencer marketing can foster a relationship of trust with citizens through genuine interactions and personal experiences, influencing their decisions and increasing facility revenue [7,8,10,12,30]. Medical influencers may be health professionals wishing to advertise their practice or the facility (usually private) they work for, or medical products. They thus aim to boost their reputation, add a human dimension to the medical field, improve the level of health literacy in the population as a whole, and gain popularity and income [7,8].

Even people outside the healthcare sector, such as former or current patients, can contribute to this aim by actively participating in online communities. There they are free to share experiences and information, and also to support other sufferers in terms of disease self-management, enhancing the reputation of specific treatment and care facilities [10-12]. The same word-of-mouth marketing technique can be applied by their followers as third-party users of social media, communities and other websites, who tend to assume the role of raising awareness of various health issues among other citizens [21,27]. Such influencers have long been recruited by pharmaceutical companies, mainly to promote their products, making them suitable candidates for the promotion of public health and individual healthcare facilities. Their active online presence allows them to boost the organic traffic of the websites of these facilities [10,12,28].

### Conclusion

The healthcare sector is characterized by high competition, both at local and national level, making it imperative for healthcare facilities to demonstrate flexibility and adaptability, especially in a demanding and constantly evolving digital environment. The aim is to differentiate themselves by attracting new customers through positive reviews and recommendations, maintaining the level of care and satisfaction of existing patients, and achieving cost-effectiveness and sustainability. It is therefore necessary to adopt and implement patient-focused public relations and communication strategies that cater to patients' needs, in order to increase their trust in the healthcare system and individual healthcare facilities, as we stress in this article. First, the planning and implementation of national communication plans, such as the CERC model, is an essential component of a methodical operational planning process. Other methods considered are paid advertising and search engine optimization, which are cost-effective, less time-consuming, and efficient strategies that have the potential to significantly increase digital visibility, website traffic and, by extension, the name recognition of healthcare providers, and have already proved useful in managing various crises.

The use of social media and email are also powerful tools that promote interaction with citizens. They are successful and

even more promising promotional strategies for enhancing the image and reputation of healthcare facilities, placing them at the center of patients' online searches.

Regular content marketing, both educational and informative, is equally beneficial, since, as stated in the literature, it helps to combat misinformation, increase the transparency of medical procedures and the quality and safety of healthcare services, and improve the skills of health professionals themselves. The contribution of influencer marketing to establishing and maintaining trust between citizens and healthcare providers is also highlighted.

Finally, another conclusion is that the combined use of all these tools can create a coherent communication strategy with many benefits for the healthcare facility that implements it. Overall, all these patient-centered medical marketing strategies can seek the public engagement necessary to build confidence and trust in the healthcare system, while delivering remarkable long-term results, especially in terms of budgeting, public relations and communication.

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