

Six Tips for Getting Your Message Out in a Competitive Environment

by Herbert P. Weiss (77)

I wish to thank Dr. Richard Lusky, Director of the Department of Applied Gerontology, and the faculty for honoring me here today. I am flattered to be recognized for something I enjoy doing. Thirty years ago, I was influenced by Drs. Hiram Friedsam, Cora Martin, and Herbert Shore. They created the Center for Studies in Aging, a unique, "practice-based" master's degree program that sent a new breed of nursing home administrators and program planners into the nation's long-term care continuum. Today, I am pleased to tell my esteemed colleagues that they have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of America's elderly have benefited from the competency and professionalism of CSA graduates.

While I stand before you today to receive the 1998 Distinguished Alumnus Award, I urge you not to forget the achievements of 537 other CSA alumni who have also made their mark by sharing their expertise, knowledge, and skills in the field of aging. In 47 states, CSA alumni successfully operate health care facilities, direct senior programs, teach at universities, lead state and national trade groups, work on Capitol Hill, and even serve as state regulators. I am grateful, as the first professional writer to receive this prestigious alumni recognition award. Previous recipients have directly influenced the development of policy, quality of senior programming, or care within a health care facility. Throughout my 18-year career, I have striven to make my unique contribution through the dissemination of information. As a writer, I have worked hard to keep long-term care providers up to date on the most recent legislative, regulatory, management, and clinical issues.

Over the years it has been my mission to continue my education in the field of aging. During this time it has been my privilege to have served as an editor of seven highly-regarded national newsletters, served as a legislative assistant for a U.S. senator, directed educational programming and research efforts in a state nursing home trade group, taught undergraduate courses as a gerontology educator at the University of Rhode Island, and written feature articles as a daily newspaper reporter. More than 175 of my articles, covering more than 33 topics, have appeared in myriad national trade publications read by long-term care providers, including McKnight's Long-Term Care News, Contemporary Long-Term Care, the American College of Health Care Administrators' Balance, Aging Today, and The Brown Long-Term Care Quality Advisor.

Being a former U.S. Senate staffer has enabled me to more effectively cover Congress and federal agencies. Yes, I saw how the legislative process worked from the inside—it was really like making sausage. This experience gave me a first-hand view of how politicians put "spins" on particular issues and used leaks to push their legislative agendas. Here's an example of a leak. On November 17, the office of the Inspector General for the Department of Health and Human Services released a scathing report on drug distribution in nursing homes. Once OIG staff learned that a U.S. senator was planning to distribute a draft report to the media, they were forced to respond quickly by releasing their final report, earlier than anticipated. As a result, the nursing home industry had no advance warning about the report's release and was again put on the defensive of addressing charges of poor care in nursing homes.

On Capitol Hill, for the majority of lawmakers, press secretaries and legislative assistants draft speeches, articles, or write talking points to prepare lawmakers for media interviews. Articles written by President Clinton, House Majority Leader Newt Gingrich, or federal officials like HHS Secretary Donna Shalala usually find their way into trade publications like McKnight's Long-Term Care News or Contemporary Long-Term Care. Thus, editors gain legitimacy for their publications by publishing "exclusive articles" while the President, lawmakers, and federal officials gain an opportunity to push their policy agenda on a press cycle. In all probability, these top politicians never read their work; however, these staff-generated articles were signed off by the press office. Most Washington, DC-based trade groups, like the American Health Care Association (AHCA) and the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging (AAHSA), also have public affairs staffs to enhance the image of nursing homes in the press and to promote their positions in the legislative and regulatory spheres. Finally, lawmakers will introduce bills on behalf of constituencies in their respective states, never fully expecting them to be considered by Congress. But a press release will no doubt be sent to the local media trumpeting the legislative initiative. Constituents with an interest in the issue will learn about the bill through a newsletter or a special targeted mailing.

So far, I have provided you with a few example of public relations at the Congressional or trade association level. But let's bring it down to the local level. As you prepare to enter the long-term care arena, it is crucial that you prepare for the increased competition between nursing facilities to fill empty beds. In addition, senior program directors are fighting for decreased state and federal funding to keep their programs afloat. It becomes crucial for you to effectively get your message out to daily newspapers and trade press to enhance your efforts to achieve your organizational goals.

Years ago, my father gave me a book, Life's Little Instruction Book. This book, listed as a bestseller by The New York Times, gave readers 511 suggestions, observations, and reminders on how to live a happy and rewarding life. No, I won't give you 511 tips like this book. But, as a freelance writer and marketing consultant who has a uniquely broad and professional background in long-term care, I will give you my version of the book, which can provide you with a rewarding life slanted to long-term care. Hopefully, my suggestions, observations, and six tips will help you get your message across to daily newspapers and trade press.

1. Always Respond to Negative Press. Over the years, across the nation, newspapers have taken greater interest in generating stories on quality problems or concerns in health care facilities. Many of these negative stories were placed on the front page of these newspapers. Most administrators decide not to respond even if the story is not accurate. Some have even told me that they will not publicly respond to negative stories because of the power of the press. Standing up to the press, even to expose inaccuracies, can lead to additional horror stories, they have told me. You lose out in the long run if you remain silent. If there is a technical inaccuracy, contact the reporter who wrote the piece and ask for a correction. If stonewalled, go to the reporter's editor with the facts. Still no response? Write a strongly worded letter to the editor or an op/ed piece. Most newspapers will give priority to a person responding to negative articles, especially if it impacts them personally. By now, most daily newspapers are computerized. When reporters are assigned stories, they can

easily go into a databank and pull previous stories written years ago. These stories serve as background materials for writing the current article. Remember, technical inaccuracies become historical fact if they are not corrected.

2. Effectively Tell Your Story. Don't go into an interview with a reporter with no agenda. Carefully determine the "main point" well in advance of the interview. Try to visualize this main point as a headline that you would like to see in the next edition of the newspaper. If you get off track, use steering points (e.g., supporting data and logic) to bring you back to your main message. It's not always easy to be interviewed. Here are a few thoughts to make it as painless as possible. Always tell the truth. Use simple English when responding. Listen carefully to the question. Take your time when responding to questions. Don't get angry at the reporter, but challenge any attempt to put words in your mouth. Give only one answer at a time. If you don't know the answer, say so. If you can't answer a question, explain why.

3. Newsletters Are Key to Successful Marketing. Nursing homes across the country are having trouble filling empty beds. Occupancy rates are low because of the growing assisted living market and competition of community-based services. Thus, it becomes crucial to keep your facility's name before the public. One easy way is to publish a marketing newsletter. Many administrators do not have the time, knowledge, or even interest to create a professional-looking publication, but this is so crucial in keeping people aware of the good happenings inside health care facilities.

In many facilities, administrators assign overworked employees, usually activity coordinators, the responsibility of creating marketing pieces. In many cases, these individuals are not knowledgeable about how to do this, nor are they provided with resources or even a budget to develop a polished product. With little or no background in publishing, many put little thought into content, graphics, or presentation. They do the best they can, but often it's not enough. It's just another job to do.

I suggest that you consider budgeting dollars to develop a marketing newsletter. Always mail this marketing publication to referral sources (e.g., managed care organizations, physicians, and hospital discharge planners). Provide a copy to residents and their families, employees, news media, state and federal lawmakers, state regulators, and long-term care providers. Your challenge is to constantly educate others who are key in ensuring that only the best is available to those who reside in our nation's health care facilities.

4. Be Accessible to Media at Conferences. Make yourself available to reporters on tight deadlines who require background information or quotes from experts. In 1995, while covering the White House Conference on Aging, I was amazed to see a senior staffer from AARP come into the press room at various times during the day. Besides bringing press releases related to the daily programming, this person was there specifically to provide quick quotes to the press. With tight deadlines, reporters got their quotes easily—he was able to get his message out to scores of daily papers and trade publications. When attending national or other health care conferences, schedule a visit to the press room. Ask for a list of reporters onsite attending the conference. Sign a copy of your newsletter or press releases. Make it a point to introduce yourself. By continuing your relationship through regular phone calls, you may be asked to write an article or even be quoted as an expert.

5. Look for Ways to Develop Spin-Offs. Make sure you get the most impact from your efforts. As an aging expert, write articles for trade publications. Article reprints can be enclosed in admission materials provided to prospective residents or used as background material for grant applications. If appropriate, send the article to family members of your residents or reprint it in your facility marketing newsletter.

With an election looming, one Rhode Island nursing home invited the lieutenant governor to the facility during National Nursing Home Week. The incumbent knew a good press opportunity when he saw one. Less than ten minutes from the capitol, he could come to a program, gain high visibility in presenting an official proclamation, shake hands with the residents, and quickly leave. A call to the city desk editor of the local daily paper resulted in a photo opportunity of a resident in the edition following the event. But here's the spin-off. The lieutenant governor was approached at the program and asked to issue a press release about his attendance. He gladly accepted the request. Another newspaper published the story about this event, including a picture of the nursing home administrator and the lieutenant governor. When working with a politician or group with a full-time press secretary, always try to get them involved in issuing press releases, too. It's a win-win situation for all involved.

6. Develop Personal Relationships with Reporters and Editors. Call the city desk editor or health care writer regularly to keep them updated about your senior program's innovative programming or your nursing facility's activities. I know of one administrator who breeds Yorkshire terriers. At dog shows she slowly developed a relationship with a daily reporter who also had an interest in dogs. After meeting at the local dog shows, the administrator was able to easily get the reporter to write a feature article on pets in nursing homes. The administrator and her Yorkies were profiled. The reprint of the article was used for marketing purposes.

Learn to effectively bring your message to your local daily and to the trade publications that cover the nursing home industry. And remember to allocate time to read through your trade publications—McKnight's Long-Term Care News, Contemporary Long-Term Care, and Today's Nursing Homes. You will receive Provider magazine if you become a member of the American Health Care Association. As a member of the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging, you will receive their monthly publication, Currents. Too many times I go into facilities and see these publications thrown on a pile on the floor, many still in their plastic wrap. The long-term care continuum is rapidly changing. These publications will help you to remain current and understand the management and care issues facing you and your staff.

In conclusion, I challenge you to continue your education even beyond the knowledge you are gaining here at CSA. Learn as much as you can about the barriers that too often stand in the way for a higher quality of living for those who reside in our nation's health care facilities. With time permitting, I would be glad to answer any questions. Thanks again for this honor.