



*Jim Parker, October 31, 2023*

A rising number of hospices have undergone name changes in recent years, prompting many to consider the elements of an effective rebranding strategy.

As hospices nationwide develop new services to engage patients further upstream, some are rebranding to reflect their expanded scope and to avoid the word “hospice” in their company names, hoping to ameliorate patients’ anxiety about end-of-life care.

A strong brand identity is crucial for hospices seeking to differentiate themselves in the marketplace, Stan Massey, senior partner at Transcend Strategy Group, said at the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization’s (NHPCO) Annual Leadership Conference in Little Rock, Arkansas.

“The role of branding is to really increase awareness of who you are as an agency and as a culture, and to more than anything differentiate you from your competitors or other options that patients and families and referrers have in your service area,” Massey said at the conference. “Branding really plays all those roles when done well.”

Hospices should avoid brand names that are too generic or that focus on one particular service line or portion of their geographic footprint. These types of brands can inadvertently silo an organization that serves a broader area and operates a range of business lines, according to Massey.

This can also cause consumers and referral partners to confuse your company with similar sounding names, he said.

For a hypothetical example, an organization called “Hospice of Smith County” could have a competitor called “Smith County Hospice.” Referral sources and patients and families may not realize that these are two different providers.

“The problem is other providers in that same geographic region can be identified by that same generic description,” Massey said. “We’ve seen firsthand when patients, families and referrers think that they are referring to a particular agency with a generic name, and they’re actually referring to a competitor.”

Considerations like these have prompted many operators to give their companies' brands a facelift.

In September, Hospice & Palliative Care of the Piedmont rebranded as Care of the Piedmont, including a new logo. Last Summer, Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY) became VNS Health, again, to represent an expanded footprint and scope of services.

California-based Hospice by the Bay has rebranded as By the Bay Health to recognize that it now offers more services than end-of-life care, including palliative care, comfort care, grief counseling, pediatric care, and skilled home health care as well as hospice services.

In Florida, Alivia Care emerged in 2020 when Community Hospice & Palliative Care rebranded into a larger company with a wider range of services. Since then, launching new programs and pursuing affiliations have been priorities for the organization, including home health and PACE.

Many in the hospice industry see service diversification as a business imperative to ensure that they can remain financially viable and build more longitudinal relationships with patients. Some also seek to capitalize on value-based payment models from which hospice care is often excluded.

Last February, Hospice of Southwest Michigan rebranded as Centrica Care Navigators. Established 40 years ago solely as a hospice, the organization now provides palliative care and adult day care.

This allowed the organization to establish a more cohesive identity, Denise King, chief marketing and development officer for Centrica, said at the NHPCO conference.

"We needed to connect the dots to our community. We had all of these service lines and they all had different colors, schemes, different logos," King said. "As an independent nonprofit hospice, we needed to come to connect the dots clearly and claim everything that we do for our community."

Centrica's rebrand reflects an effective strategy in the hospice space, creating a "branded house," according to Massey. A key example of this in the larger business world is Richard Branson's The Virgin Group.

The company operates a range of subsidiaries that fall underneath the "Virgin" name, including an airline, a record company and a publicly traded space travel firm, Virgin Galactic (NYSE: SPCE).

"You can see in their different product lines that they have that very distinctive font that says 'Virgin,' and they marry it with different descriptor lines — hotels, books; most of you know Virgin Airlines," Massey said. "But you can see at first glance that there's that distinct connection to the core brand name, and this tends to work really well in creating what we call an 'umbrella brand.'"

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