

Healthcare Marketing White Paper



# Digital Storytelling for Hospital Brands-Part I

Engage audiences with honest,  
emotional stories



## DIGITAL STORYTELLING FOR HOSPITAL BRANDS - PART I

**Engage audiences with honest, emotional stories**

There's a place, an idyllic, forested valley where tall mountains catch the first rays of sunrise, rolling farmlands slant down to bustling towns and historic cities crowd the tree-lined banks of a mighty river. Many of the residents of this valley are local people who grew up here and never left; others came to visit and decided to stay. In this special place, they found a relaxed lifestyle and easy access to commerce, education, recreation, nature and culture. It seemed the valley provided everything they needed – everything except a good hospital for their families...

This is how the story began for Columbia Memorial Hospital, a 200-bed community hospital in New York's Hudson Valley. The center of healthcare in the area for over 100 years, the organization was now losing patients to larger, academic medical centers located in metro markets to their north and south. And they had a less than ideal reputation for care, with residents regularly traveling up to two hours away to other physicians and care centers. Things weren't looking good, until the hospital found a compelling way to share their story through digital marketing channels.

In the course of one year, a rebranded Columbia Memorial Health (CMH) made big gains in changing perceptions and attracting patients at unprecedented rates. How? By telling a compelling brand story, and taking advantage of owned media channels to align internal and external audiences.

In this white paper, we'll look at how digital storytelling helped reshape the brand perception of the Columbia Memorial organization, and how you can apply storytelling tactics to build your brand and improve your marketing outcomes.

### **Storytelling is a way to humanize a brand**

Understanding what a hospital offers that's unique, relevant and appealing to the target audience is the foundation for a competitive position. To realize the full potential of their marketing investment, it's important that hospitals communicate a unique experience, and then deliver it consistently and reliably. Employees look to the CEO for gestures, meaning and focus – to help them embrace the hospital's core values and understand how they influence the customer experience.

Some people would say that hospitals are cold, sterile, bureaucratic institutions populated only by impersonal, uninvolved doctors and nurses. But hospital brands are bigger than that. Brands are more about the customer experience. By introducing the individuals – the administrators, the physicians, the nurses, the housekeepers, the valets – and the core values they share, hospitals and health systems can personalize their brand, and help patients associate the organization with the humans behind the brand.

The brand story can help communicate the organization's origins, its shared mission, a differentiating competitive position. Hospital leadership can use storytelling to align staff to a single brand promise, share employee success stories and help convey the desired patient experience that each employee should strive to deliver.



Life in the valley was good, except when the shadow of sickness fell across its residents. Then the afflicted individuals left their families and set out on a journey to distant medical centers for care. What the residents of the valley didn't know was that the community hospital that had served them for over 100 years was going through a significant change, transforming itself and reaching out into the communities of the valley.

Doctors and specialists from around the world were discovering their little valley, and choosing to raise their own families there, too. They joined the hospital's network, staffing local practices and opening new primary care centers throughout the valley. Here they could practice medicine, get to know their neighbors and enjoy a better quality of life. The local people could have access to care right in the community, and know that they could get referrals to top specialists for more serious health conditions. If only they knew about the level of care that was available...

The next chapter of Columbia Memorial Health's story was about their physicians. While local perceptions of the quality of care was low, it turned out that many of their care providers had studied at the world's top universities and practiced at the nation's leading care centers. Smith and Jones decided to use the brand's website to introduce some of CMH's specialists to the community. We did video interviews with over 30 doctors in the first year, but to reinforce our brand position, we took them out of the clinical environment, and made use of the lush scenery and sweeping panoramas of the Hudson Valley. The videos appeared across the website and in television spots on local cable stations, to create visibility and awareness for the brand.

The doctors' stories were remarkably consistent: after studying medicine in some of the top universities and medical centers, these physicians came to practice in the Hudson Valley for the professional opportunities of the organization, but also for the high quality of life that attracted the local residents as well. They told about how they had grown to love the region, and how working in a smaller community allowed doctors to spend more time with patients, to care for the people that they see in their hometowns, and deliver a more personalized care experience. And while the hospital couldn't provide all the medical services that the major academic centers could, the physicians of their growing health network had colleagues and contacts at the very best care centers in the region. These physicians brought their vast training in medicine to the Hudson Valley, and delivered a more personal, one-on-one care experience for their patients - the people they had come to know and see in their communities.



## THE BENEFITS OF A GREAT BRAND STORY

### Define your customer personas

Storytelling is a way to define customer personas: Who chooses this brand? How do they work together? What can a customer expect from the experience? Sharing brand stories, especially honest, emotional stories, helps prospective customers understand the patient experience:

- The needs or health conditions that lead to the relationship;
- The types of services and treatments the brand delivers;
- How the care was different or better than someplace else; and
- (Hopefully) a successful outcome that makes the brand more desirable.

### Make people care

There's something about a good story that draws us in, commands our attention and sparks our imaginations. But it's hard to evoke empathy for a large, complex institution like a hospital. That's why it's important to relate the brand experience to the human condition. Telling an emotional, honest patient story (not to be confused with a self-serving testimonial), one person's experience can make people care about your character (and pay attention to your message).

### Make people believe

Brand storytelling is a great way to support your brand promise and competitive position. Storytelling goes beyond the straight patient testimonial, too. Hearing a person rave about how great the doctors are can come off as non-genuine or forced – where if they are simply recounting their experience and the success of their treatment, it demonstrates the medical expertise by the outcome – rather than simply bragging about it with unsubstantiated claims.

### Inspire audiences to take action

Stories show people what to expect, help them imagine their own care and results, and demonstrate what action to take, whether that's a visit to a website, requesting an appointment with a doctor or a phone call.



## What makes a compelling story?

The art of storytelling is as old as human language. From the earliest tales of our hunting exploits to the 21st century fascination with real-time social sharing, the principles of storytelling haven't changed. The best stories share many common elements; or features that should also appear in a well-crafted brand story.

### Here are some key story elements to consider:

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- **Characters:** Great stories have a protagonist or hero, characters that people can root for, believe in and relate to. Your characters may be your patients (customers), members of your community or your internal team, such as hospital leaders, physicians, or staff. Develop your characters' personas, tell their backstory and create a rich, dimensional character that people can care about. When audiences connect with your characters, they develop a natural affinity for your brand.
- **Purpose:** Establish your characters' purpose or goal. Give them something to strive for, whether it's restoring their health, supporting their family or providing better care for someone else. Characters need a reason to exist to be interesting.
- **Conflict/Obstacle:** The best stories aren't all sunshine and rainbows, or there would be no story to tell. There's almost always an antagonist, a villain, or a set back that threatens to keep the hero from reaching their goal. In healthcare, that could be a medical condition, a lack of care, a lack of financial resources or an organizational challenge that creates tension in the story's plot.
- **Resolution:** A well-crafted story builds to a climax, a turning point where the character's conflict is resolved and they make progress toward their goal. Hopefully your brand is part of the solution, carrying your character to a happy ending that makes the reader or viewer feel good about themselves and your organization.
- **Look for these storytelling elements as you seek out your brand story.** With the right pieces, your story will begin to fall in place. How you tell the story will depend on the media where it's delivered. The next section will look at how to translate the brand story into different formats and outlets.



The people in the valley noticed a change in the wind. The old hospital that had been avoided was now recognized as a central part of a much larger care network, with local access through offices near almost every town and village. The people learned that physicians who trained in some of the most prestigious medical centers in America were practicing right in their neighborhoods. They cared for children, parents and grandparents, and took time to get to know their patients. And when a serious condition was discovered, these doctors sent their patients to the top specialists in the region, and followed up on their care. Word spread: people recommended doctors to their neighbors and friends, and more and more of them discovered that they really did have access to great healthcare in their beautiful river valley.



The Columbia Memorial Health brand story was built on their history, their role in the community, and their accomplishments to create a new perception of the organization. The launch combined several strategic messaging decisions that helped support the story:

- ➊ Introduced the brand message, “Fresh care, delivered daily,” to build awareness and preference for the brand’s forward-thinking care and local access.
- ➋ Rebranded the hospital as CMH, or Columbia Memorial Health, to emphasize the far-reaching primary care and specialty care network.



- ④ Leveraged digital and mass market advertising to build brand awareness and drive online visitors to the website and web videos.
- ④ Used physician interviews and video to introduce the people behind the care – caregivers trained and tested at some of the nation’s leading care centers, who chose to live here in the community.
- ④ Differentiated the brand with distinctive, local imagery and non-clinical settings, as well as a fresh color palette and graphic identity.

The results were almost immediate: The first primary care campaign drove the largest increase in outpatient revenue that the hospital had ever recorded. The story has inspired the staff, too. Employees are sharing their own “fresh care delivered daily” images on the organization’s social media channels and inside the clinical facilities.

## HOW TO TELL YOUR BRAND STORY

### Read Part II

In Part I of this white paper, we discussed how to humanize your healthcare organization through an emotional brand promise and broke down the components of a compelling narrative. Just like all great stories, there’s a means to an end. In Part II of Digital Storytelling, we will take a look at the process behind creating storylines for your hospital and how to spread these messages across multimedia channels.

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