

# A Hospital Brand Is A Terrible Thing To Waste

Written by Andrea Simon, PhD, CEO and Founder, Simon Associates Management Consultants | April 16, 2014

Nationwide, more than 100 healthcare organizations have changed names over the past two years. Given the latest healthcare reforms, that list continues to grow, as healthcare systems struggle to stand out amid an increasingly competitive landscape.

However, the high number of new or refreshed names makes me wonder whether these institutions are so internally focused on change for change's sake, that they've forgotten how much people care about a name and the brand behind it. So if they change a name, administrators need to show consumers why the renamed institution is (still) the best place for their care.

Beyond the need to differentiate their healthcare organizations, administrators have several other reasons for the flurry of name changes. I list some of them below, along with consequences and questions that frequently arise.

**1. Mergers and acquisitions.** One institution buys another, or goes bankrupt, or becomes part of a system of hospitals, or two hospitals merge. These are all legitimate reasons for name changes. But a new name, logo, signage and business cards aren't enough to convey how the institution will benefit consumers. Yet many healthcare systems stop at the naming stage, leaving themselves vulnerable to competitors who undertake proper branding and marketing efforts. Those competitors will be much more visible and attractive, ultimately stealing patients.

**2. Institutional change.** The old name is out of alignment with the new scope of services, and a name change can showcase this growth. Press copy usually reads like this: "Our new name reflects our health system's substantial growth throughout the past 40 years." Revealing nothing more than that, this reason leaves consumers thinking, "So what? How will your business growth affect my care?"

**3. Expansion.** Many hospitals now add "regional" to their names, reflecting the addition of comprehensive services that make the hospital a destination facility rather than a jumping point for a higher level of care. But bigger isn't always better.

**4. Consumer comprehension.** After 14 years of trying to get people to use its name correctly, Lincoln, Neb.-based BryanLGH renamed itself Bryan Health. Now that was a smart move. Simple, memorable names are always better.

**5. A fresh start.** To help a hospital's ailing reputation, sometimes the facility needs a fresh start and new name. But that's really just the beginning of what should happen to reinvent a hospital's image. The hospital needs to look closely at why its reputation is tarnished, change whatever's wrong, and then show (not just tell) consumers how this new institution lives up to its new name.

**6. To cut costs.** Although this gesture seems noble, it's often hollow when you really study the numbers. Sometimes cutting costs leads to unforeseen expenses and care of lesser quality, which can yield even more trouble.

**7. Broader goals/new vision.** In this case, you hear administrators extol the new name, saying that it embraces the spirit of a new network of care — not just one hospital, but the broader delivery of healthcare through medical groups, outpatient services and other programs. That all sounds good, but will it mean more bureaucracy for the consumer? Will the feel-good aspects of the old hospital go away?

**8. "Hospital" is a better word than "medical center."** A CEO of a children's hospital said that his research indicated a stronger association between higher levels of care and the word "hospital," in comparison to "medical center." Researching naming options before renaming a healthcare system is one key to success.

**9. Returning to the original brand.** With this flurry of changes, some renamed hospitals discovered that they were better off before the switch — and returned to the original brand and name. Via Christi Hospital is changing three names of its hospitals back to what they were, after making the names match their street locations. Given this example, it's sometimes more prudent for a healthcare system to actually keep its original name, while updating what the brand should mean now to current and future patients.

While we can highlight many other examples, the ultimate learning from our research so far is that changing the name of a healthcare system needs to be thoroughly considered. Sometimes changing the name is the right move, sometimes it isn't.

Also, research, strategy and a full branding and marketing plan are required to transform any new name into a brand that speaks to today's consumers, giving them an engaging, consistent experience with every visit. It's less about the name and more about the experience.

No doubt, countless healthcare systems will change their names this year, but it will be more interesting to see how many of those follow up with major branding and marketing efforts. Those that respect the entire process will stand the best chance

of thriving in this turbulent healthcare landscape, emerging as the best places for patients to receive the care they desire.

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