

Don't lose your hospital brand when changing names

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by [Andrea J. Simon](#)

A wave of renaming activity has been taking place among healthcare organizations throughout the past two years. Our research shows almost 75 hospitals or healthcare systems have changed their names, and the list is still growing.

So what are hospital administrators' reasons for changing their institutions' names--never a simple or inexpensive undertaking--and what are the real consequences--seen and unseen--that accompany these name changes?

Whether these new names are actually going to help their brands during changing times is up in the air and only time will tell. But hospital leadership that believes a name change is necessary to rebrand and reposition their healthcare system for the future may be seriously mistaken.

[More:]

Common reasons to change a hospital's name:

Mergers and acquisition: One institution bought another, or was part of a system of hospitals without a common name--a clear and legitimate reason for changing the name. Or two or more hospitals, often with multiple services along the continuum of care, required some nomenclature to integrate them.

The typical solution? A brand architecture with one name driving the entire system, i.e., a "branded house." However, what most often happens is once the name change takes place and the signage and business cards get redesigned, the branding efforts stop. That's when branding should really begin in earnest.

Institutional change: The old name is out of alignment with the new scope of services. In this case, a name change seems an appropriate response to 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 you thinking "so what."

Expansion: Many hospitals say they are now "regional" medical centers. As one hospital stated: "The use of 'regional' reflects the addition of comprehensive services that make the hospital a destination facility rather than a jumping point for a higher level of care." Is this enough explanation for consumers to really believe this facility is now a destination, no longer merely a transfer station to other hospitals with higher levels of care?

Consumer comprehension: "After 14 years trying to get people to use its name correctly, BryanLGH is losing the name it adopted after a 1997 merger and is renaming itself Bryan Health. The new name reflects the system's growth over the past 15 years." Apparently, the Nebraska health system could not get people to say the old name right so the new name comes along to lend a hand. From a branding perspective, here's hoping it also lends greater clarity and simplicity to the story.

Fresh start: "To help the hospital's branding and marketing, hospital officials have been saying for months that the facility needs a fresh start and a new name with a regional focus to improve its viability and reputation." Ever heard of putting lipstick on a pig?

Broader goals: "This new name embraces the spirit of our new networks of care, which focus not just on hospitals, but on the broader delivery of healthcare through our medical groups, outpatient services and other healthcare programs." Maybe as they added more items to the menu, they thought changing the name of the diner would suffice.



Changing a name is not at all the same as rebranding. Yes, names are critically important. But they only have impact if they mean something in the minds of the consumers you are trying to capture. And mind-share doesn't come along just because you refreshed your name, or chucked it altogether and came up with a new one. If anything, you are in danger of creating confusion, cynicism and commoditization. Price will become the only driver of choice.

Brands and their names should bring clarity and simplicity to a decision process so people can choose one healthcare institution over another in their search for one that matches their values and needs. The name is extremely important, but only if it represents something.

For those hospital administrators who are considering a name change for their organization:

1. **A name is a very important symbol** through which an organization can communicate the essence of what they are and project a snapshot of the promise they make. A good, effective name may be so well conceptualized that it captures and communicates the brand. But usually, it requires additional help making the brand promise come alive.
2. **In healthcare, a brand promise must be consistently delivered at every touch point**--as if it is Starbucks. The name must communicate the anticipated experience.
3. **Names and their associated brands have the ability to provide direction**, both internally and externally, and to serve as a way to differentiate from the competition.
4. **The complexity of a healthcare experience requires the brand to simplify the decision-making process.** The name and the brand story serve as a filter, an emotional bond and a compass, orienting people toward your institution or away from it.
5. **Ultimately, unlike the hospital that had trouble getting people to say its name right**, a hospital's name and the brand it comes to represent should set the platform for future growth.

Stay tuned--there's more to this story!

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