

Brand Strategies to Address Outmigration

The **brand** of a critical access hospital, clinic, or other rural health care organization is what the community thinks and feels about it. Outmigration is often tied to limited **brand awareness** and low patient loyalty. This technical assistance brief focuses on efforts to increase awareness and engagement. It begins with a clear understanding of **brand identity** and expands into engagement techniques and examples of successful strategies.

Brand

A health care organization's brand is the culmination of all engagement and communication strategies aimed at improving service utilization and reducing outmigration. A brand answers the question: "What do people know and feel about us?"

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is how well the patients and community recognize the health care organization and understand what it offers. Brand awareness answers the question: "Do people know who we are and what we do?"

Branding

Branding is the work an organization does to shape its reputation. It includes messaging, visuals, social media, patient experience, community outreach and communication. These components do not stand alone and should work together to strengthen a positive reputation. Branding answers the question: "How do we share who we are and what we do?"

Brand Identity

Brand identity is how a health care organization presents itself. It includes consistent use of logos, colors, fonts, tone, key messages, photography, and design standards. A brand identity should reflect both services offered and the population served. It answers the question: "How do we present ourselves to patients and the community?"

Brand Changes

Operationally, changes may be a crucial step to let the community know the full scope of services and improve the organization's brand. Updates can help signal growth and stability. Changes to an organization's brand identity require careful consideration, especially in rural communities where long-standing ties carry meaning.

Naming updates are a common change and should be made in ways that allow the organization to maintain connection to the community. In many cases, simple changes such as adding "health care" or "medical center" can clarify services and preserve familiarity. Name changes may also occur when an organization is acquired by a system or enters into an affiliate agreement. This adds a layer of complexity to the changes due to a new health system's branding standards.



Key Definitions

Brand

"What do people know about us?"

Brand Awareness

"Do people know who we are and what we do?"

Branding

"How do we share who we are and what we do?"

Brand Identity

"How do we present who we are and what we do?"



Regardless of why a name change may be necessary, the change should be universal, incorporating all signage, logos, printed material, websites, etc. Allowing multiple versions or iterations to coexist can create confusion and weaken trust and confidence in the brand. With advance planning and coordination across leadership, staff, and volunteers, organizations have been successful in their rebranding efforts.

Storytelling and Elevator Pitch

A key engagement strategy that can help address outmigration is your organization's "story." Whether on campus, in clinics, or interacting with patients by phone or virtually, the organization's story plays a role in clearly conveying how it meets the community's health needs. Patient-focused messaging can help build awareness, highlight quality care, and promote the organization as a place of employment.

An "elevator pitch" can be an important part of this storytelling. The concept answers the question: "If I had the opportunity to talk to a stranger about the company during a short elevator ride, what would I say?" This approach allows the organization to develop a readily available and easy-to-memorize script for staff use. The emphasis is on what matters most to the patient, such as access to high-quality care close to home. As part of the organization's branding, providing these types of scripts, prompts, and communication training ensures alignment and confidence across all interaction points.

Key Messages

Health care organizations often use multiple taglines and campaign messages to drive patient engagement and highlight services or quality. The effectiveness of these messages depends on clear and deliberate word choice. Consistency is important, and the messaging can be informed by patient feedback or community input. This approach helps reinforce a strong brand and guides patients toward choosing local care.

Tailored Material

Branded materials are more effective when they reflect the needs, preferences, and concerns of different patient groups. Using information about patient experiences and communities helps tailor messaging. For example, using sports as a topic at an orthopedic clinic may connect athletes with the clinic. This type of approach supports targeted communication that resonates and provides a way for patients to connect with the health care organization. Connection helps reduce avoidable bypass and addresses outmigration.

Examples of Successful Brand Changes

Lafayette Hospital and Clinics

Darlington, WI

Updated name aligns with a new replacement facility and emphasizes a broader system of care, reinforcing commitment to patient-centered services across the region.

Effingham Health System

Springfield, GA

Renamed from "Effingham Hospital and Care Center" to reflect expanded services and modernization efforts, improving perception as services and competition grew across the region.

Kirby Medical Center

Monticello, IL

Maintained the "Kirby" name during a replacement facility project to preserve community connection, while introducing a new logo with updated design elements that reflect past, present, and future.

Addressing outmigration requires clear and consistent communication that reflects community needs and builds trust. Brand, messaging, and engagement shape how patients perceive care and influence where they choose to seek it. Strengthening these areas supports retention, reinforces value, and positions the health care organization as a trusted source of care close to home. For additional support, contact TASC at TASC@ruralcenter.org.

This technical assistance brief, updated in 2026, contains information prepared by
Impact! Communications, Inc. 1144 E. State Street, Suite A #287 Geneva, IL 60134

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provided financial support for this Information Services to Rural Hospital Flexibility Project. The award provided 100% of total costs and totaled \$1,100,000. The contents are those of the author. They may not reflect the policies of HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government.

