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Visiting Nurse Services of Newport and Bristol County: Increasing Program Awareness for the Help at Home Program

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Increasing Program Awareness for the Help at Home Program



Community Partner: *Visiting Nurse Services of Newport & Bristol County*

Academic Partner: *Mario J. Gabelli School of Business and the Small Business Institute*

Spring 2014



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Visiting Nurse Services of Newport and Bristol Counties

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Small Business Institute

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May/9/2014

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Executive Summary

Our project this semester was with the Visiting Nurse Services of Newport and Bristol Counties. Our first task with this project was to understand the business and get to know our clients and what exactly they wanted us to accomplish. Nursing is a specialized field and we needed to know the areas in which we would be focusing. We were put in touch with Judy Mason who would serve as our main liaison to VNS, through her we learned that they offer a range of services from child care, to physical therapy, even transportation. However, their main area of focus and their most lucrative service was geriatric care.

It became clear that VNS lacked the exposure it needed to compete with surrounding competitors. Our team then focused in on different avenues of advertising throughout Bristol and Newport County. We thought of our target audience and tried to hone in on where the best possible places to reach our customers would be. After much discussion, we figured hospital waiting rooms would be a great start. VNS has pamphlets that are not being utilized, although to our knowledge they have hundreds of them. Putting the pamphlets in places such as doctors' offices can target our audience at the main place we are trying to keep them out of. Another location we considered was dropping the pamphlet off at independent living homes for the elderly. Our logic being, they already have the mindset to live independently, so let VNS help them achieve their long term goals of staying healthy.

As a business, we would like VNS to be recognized more than by word of mouth, so we suggested that the company creates a LinkedIn page. LinkedIn is a great way for companies to connect with current and potential clients. Not to mention it is also a phenomenal way to gain some free advertising and with the short marketing budget VNS has, it seems like a great decision. We talked with Judy Mason, the coordinator of the program, and she seemed thrilled about the opportunity to get free advertising for the company so we set her up their very own LinkedIn page.

Geriatric care is extremely expensive and to VNS knowledge most insurance companies do not cover the cost of at home care. To most, looking at the daunting cost of several hundred dollars an hour seems out of the question, but after revision of statistics from outstanding medical cost, we found that in the long run, maintaining your health with a couple visits a week can help lower the risk of running into a major health problem. Our teams' job was to then show how VNS' service is almost like buying an insurance policy on one's self. We utilized a study done by John Hopkins Bay view Medical Center comparing home care costs to the average hospital stay, the results were strongly in favor of in home care in every aspect of the study.

Lastly, our team is working with Professor Cooper to take a look at and maybe reevaluate the CPT and ICP-9/10 codes VNS uses. There may be some discrepancies and possible changes that could be recognized by the insurance companies to cut the cost of VNS' service by over 50%. This could totally change the target market and would allow VNS to still get paid, just by more clients that can now afford the service. This could be a difficult process making sure that the codes align exactly but if done correctly the results would be phenomenal. Our hope is that our research and marketing plan will work to gain VNS more exposure and ultimately more clients to work as a strong foundation for their business.

The project we chose to undertake this semester was the Visiting Nurse Services of Newport and Bristol Counties. Our first task with this project was to understand the business and to get to know our clients and what exactly they wanted us to accomplish. Nursing is a specialized field and we needed to know the areas in which we would be focusing. We were put in touch with Judy Mason who would serve as our main liaison to VNS, through her we learned that they offer a wide range of services from child care, to physical therapy, even transportation. However, their main area of focus, and their most lucrative service, was geriatric care. VNS offers seniors the at home care they need in order to stay independent and stay out of full-time nursing homes and even emergency rooms. Visits can range from daily, weekly, or even monthly in order to best serve the needs of the customer, though the average of their current customers is about 3-4 visits per week. This service is extremely beneficial not only for the seniors whom, they cater to, but the families of the clients as well. Without a visiting nurse it usually falls to the children to check in, administer medicine, and to help with all basic needs for their relatives. With The Visiting Nurses this burden vanishes and is replaced with peace of mind. But even with such benefits available VNS was having difficulty acquiring new clients mainly because the initial cost seems so high. This was the main issue we needed to address through our marketing efforts, how to get the client to get over the sticker shock and see the true value of the service and how they could benefit in the long run.

The first step in developing our marketing plan was identifying the target audience, which would be the most lucrative for us to pursue. The main clients that VNS works with are elderly people basically 65 years and older. According to a recent US census the United States population aged 65 and over is expected to double in size over the next 25 years. Of this, 14

million reported some level of disability due to a high prevalence of chronic conditions such as heart disease or arthritis. In Rhode Island alone elderly residents account for a little more than 15% of the entire population, according to this data VNS should have no shortage of clients anytime in the near future. But if that is the case why is finding customers so difficult? This is because it is typically not the direct client who makes first contact with VNS, but the children of said patient. Adults between the ages of 35 and 50 are the people who desire the extra help of having an in home care agent. As a family member's health deteriorates it falls to those closest to them to take care of them and this can be a heavy burden. This is the group of people who convince their parents that this service is one they need which is why this is the group that we chose to target.

Before we began our research we first had to collaborate and come up with a few key marketing objectives to outline in our plan. The first was to identify the forms of social media that would be the most useful to VNS. Social Media is a huge platform that continues to grow every day, VNS had already employed the use of a blog (to which they had a link located on their website), and a Facebook page, though they admitted there wasn't time to post much and both could probably use work. Our second objective was to update the bookmark which they used to hand out to potential clients and generally just try to get the word out about the business. We also wanted to look into analyzing the costs of at home care versus hospital care. Lastly, we wanted to investigate Insurance coverage, we were shocked to learn that none of the services were currently covered by insurance and we wanted to see if there was any way to change that or how competitors handled that particular problem. Our goal is to use all of this information in a cohesive plan that will attract customers and consequently increase VNS' client base.

We quickly learned that up until this point VNS did not have any form of advertising whatsoever. We had to discuss and brainstorm which avenues of marketing would be most helpful in reaching the correct audience and getting the word out about their services. VNS had not yet explored the free social media platforms that were available to them and requested our help not only to navigate, but also establish a social media presence. We initially looked at the big three social media outlets, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Upon further discussion we realized that Facebook would not be the best choice because of the intended use of the site. Facebook was aimed more toward connection with friends and didn't have the right format for the information we were trying to display. Twitter was ruled out as well because of the difficulty to obtain followers; without followers no one would be able to read up on what VNS was saying, twitter is also typically used by younger generations, and was not the right age bracket for the group we were trying to reach. LinkedIn, however, was a more professional site than Facebook and had a much older audience that the other two sites failed to target. Through this format they would be able to use their industry tag to get VNS' name out there and use their existing clients as the perfect segue to get a base amount of connections. Once underway, this will be a useful tool for them to get their name out and spread the word about their business. When we first established the LinkedIn profile, we had some difficulty explaining how to navigate the site. This generational difference we had planned for, so we took the time to show them how to properly navigate the site and use it to its full advantage.

Our team then started to question which areas they were currently advertising in and where they have expanded. Their radius was not as big as we had initially guessed and their only form of advertisement was word of mouth. This left us with a blank slate to build a marketing plan from. As far as their audience went, they had only reached out to Bristol, Portsmouth,

Tiverton and Newport, and with such a small client base we wondered at the benefits of expanding their radius. While brainstorming ideas, we learned VNS had a bookmark with text on the front and back, which we thought was a great start, but they weren't putting it anywhere for potential clients to take and learn about what they offer. We decided to find useful places as contact points to leave their information such as doctors' offices and senior centers where they would be most likely found by the people who needed them. Some places such as hospitals were out of the question for contact points because when a person employs the use of a visiting nurse they are taking away the need for hospital visits, given there are far less accidents and issues that need to be addressed in an emergency setting. For this reason we had to focus on places that worked with visiting nurses and would benefit from having their help. For example, the nurses often drive their clients to doctors' appointments and having a nurse there on behalf of the customer can make things easier for all parties which made this a prime location to reach out to new customers.

The second problem with the bookmark was it only consisted of two sides of solid text with very small print, they simply tried to put too much information into too small of a space. It was overwhelming to look at and at first glance, no one would want to read it. We reworked the pamphlet in order to get the most important information across without overwhelming the reader with too much wordy content. We suggested things like bullet point lists, which are generally more aesthetically pleasing, and less daunting to read. We created a few samples and worked with VNS to choose the one that we felt best expressed the points they needed to get across during initial contact with potential clients. This also led to some challenges for the advertising aspect as well. We found out in our first meeting that they did not have a lot of extra money and this is why they have not been pro-active about advertising. It seemed like VNS was open to

hearing us talk to them about how important advertising is and can really improve the company and spread the name a lot further. The new pamphlet has a much simpler design, keeping in mind that audience we are reaching for we felt that this was the best tactic. We include a short list of possible services provided along with the VNS mission statement, which sums up what the business is truly about. We also encouraged readers to call and go online to discover further information.

Our Mission Statement:
VNS is a not-for-profit, Independent home healthcare and hospice agency founded in 1950 as your neighborhood Visiting Nurse. Our mission is to provide community services that promote optimal health and quality of life for individuals and families in our own communities. Not a division of any larger health care organization, the VNS of Newport and Bristol Counties (Rhode Island and Massachusetts) is your independent local home care agency that specializes 24/7 in homecare, hospice, and community wellness clinics.



Go to www.vnsri.org for more information!


 1184 East Main Road, **Portsmouth, RI**
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Visiting Nurse Services of Newport and Bristol Counties

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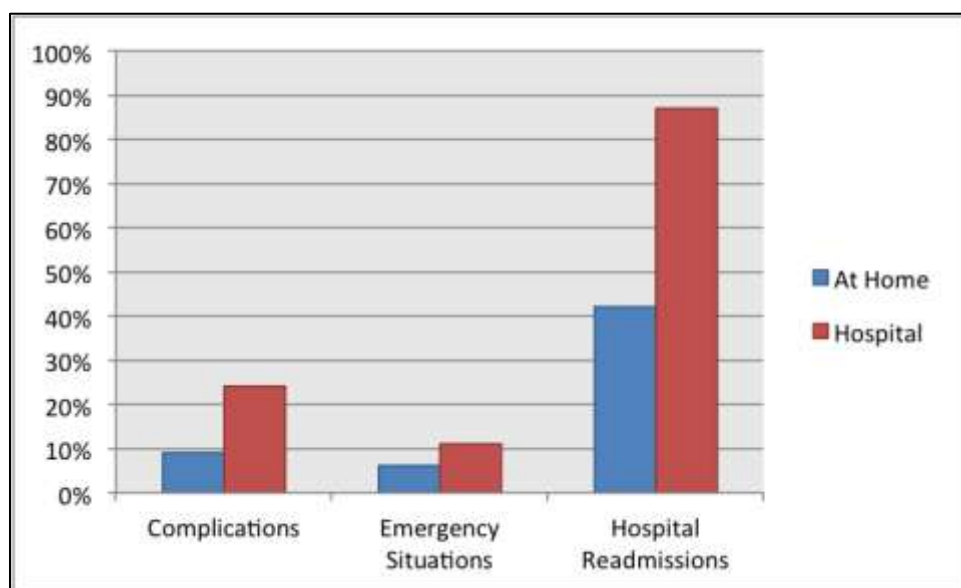
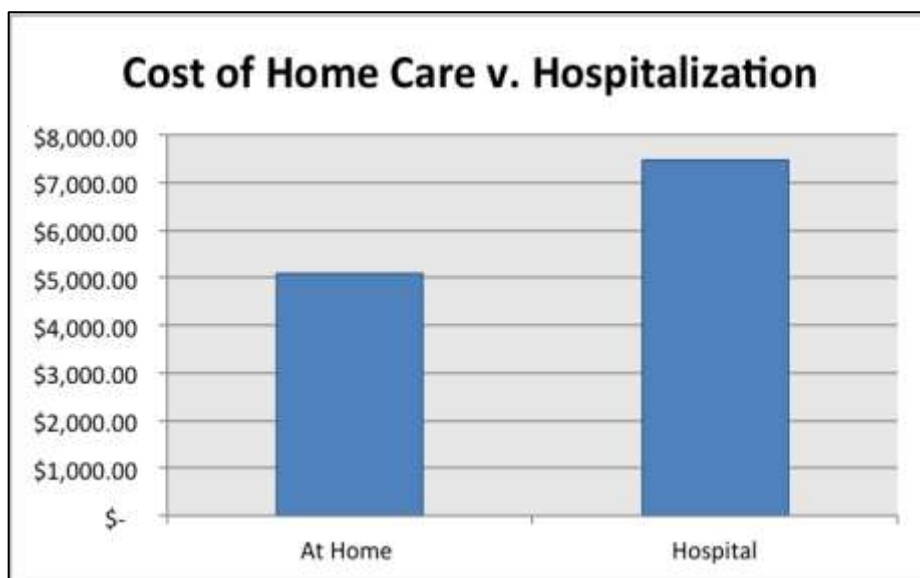
We then needed to decide other areas in which it would be best to advertise. One idea that seemed especially promising was targeting semi-independent living facilities for elderly people who may not necessarily have family to look after them nearby but still need the reliability of having extra help around without losing their independence. We figured that the whole target demographic lived in these areas and it couldn't hurt to leave a flyer in their mailbox. This type of advertising could prove to be very lucrative with the possible return that it offers. In any given senior complex there are anywhere between 30-100 living spaces occupied by senior residents, all of which had made a conscious decision to live by themselves. As the residents age, they lose the ability to be left alone more and more. VNS could capitalize on this by offering the service that lets them continue living on their own and stay out of nursing homes. Even a couple visits a week could prove very beneficial and having a larger client base is how word spreads between the people currently being served and future customers.

Most people think that they can do without VNS and take their chances with waiting until they need to go to the hospital. The main deterrent that has been an issue with VNS is the cost. This service is expensive and that is what causes a red flag for some families. We were shocked to discover that VNS did not take insurance which meant people were paying cash for every single visit, being such a necessary service it was surprising to know that it wasn't backed up by insurance companies but the truth is a lot of companies like VNS struggle with getting their services covered for their clients, and with a rate of \$125 an hour it is a hefty price for some people to manage. After doing research we found that certain procedures can possibly be covered by insurance depending on how it is worded in order to coincide with the insurance CPT and ICD 9/10 codes. If this can be accomplished I think that the benefits would be huge, people

would be much more willing and open minded to looking into the service if they knew they could have help from their insurance, and this will undoubtedly lead to an increase in customers. This would also help VNS become more competitive in this field. Our professor, Joel Cooper has previous experience with the health insurance industry and he has offered to assist VNS to make the connection to drive this form of reimbursement. It could be a complicated process, making sure that the services align exactly with the specific wording of the Insurance codes but if it is done properly the benefits could be enormous.

That being said, I think that the strongest draw for customers is going to be making them understand the full benefit of the program. We came up with the idea of using a cost analysis to clearly demonstrate the advantage of home care vs. hospitalization. John Hopkins Bay view Medical Center conducted a study within their geriatrics unit to test their Hospital At Home program against typical on-site care at the hospital. The study was held over the course of 30 days involving hundreds of patients across three cities and the results were staggering. Not only was at home care 32% cheaper (\$5,081 versus \$7,480) but also overall customer satisfaction was significantly higher. In a hospital setting the risk of complication is much higher; you have an increased likelihood of catching infections as well as incident delirium, whereas within home care this likelihood decreased drastically from 24% to 9%. In home care also decreases the need for emergency care situations (6% compared to 11%) nearly half of what you would expect in a hospital setting. One of the most staggering statistics revealed in this study was that hospital readmission after the initial visit is 87% whereas with in home care that number drops to 42%. Finally, I think that one of the most important facts from this study involved stressful experiences for the family. Overall, family members reported to be much happier with the care that was provided by personal physicians instead of the care provided at the hospital. In the

hospital setting it was reported that each family experienced an average of 4.3 stressful incidents involving their loved one, with at home care this number dropped to 1.7. The May 2004 *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* reports that “homecare reduced total costs of care for patients suffering from heart failure and co-morbid conditions, attributable to fewer and later hospitalizations and fewer deaths.” (Naylor, Mary D., et al., *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, May 2004.)



These statistics paint a very clear picture of all the benefits VNS has to offer. It is hard to justify a cost when there is nothing to compare it to, and this is true for all big ticket purchases, once the cost of VNS is aligned with emergency room costs it is obvious which has the most value and it makes their price seem that much more reasonable.

Another obstacle we encountered was that people feel uncomfortable with a stranger walking into their homes and taking on such an important role within their family. In order to eliminate some of this uneasiness, we recommended that they give a free first consultation, just so clients can get to know who is taking care of them and get a better idea of what to expect before they start to pay top dollar for their services. The idea here is to show the potential client what VNS can help them do every day and show how they can truly make a positive impact on the family and on the health of the client. We truly wanted to sell the idea that when you sign up with VNS it is a family affair and they work to keep the family involved and updated on the status of the client. We understand that it is a difficult choice, first admitting the need for help and then allowing an outsider to step in and give you the help you need; with the initial consultation the aim is to show understanding and compassion in order to relieve some of the stress and anxiety that tends to go with this process. With the elderly it can be especially difficult for them to accept outside help and this visit is meant to pave the way for a smooth transition into the routine of regular visits with their aid.

One feature that we found particularly important for VNS to focus on was the addition of a comments section on their website or to be given directly to their clients in the form of a comment card. This will serve as an anonymous spot where present and former clients can leave feedback for not only the company to see, but for other prospective clients to gain insight on what kind of care the nurses provide. The feedback given through this can be invaluable for a

business such a VNS who works so directly with the happiness of their customers. When it comes to gaining new clients, it is proven that people are more likely to trust advice given by other people in their same position and having positive feedback for others to read can be a big selling point. Any problems that customers have can also be quickly addressed and avoided in the future.

When looking at the competitors of VNS we found that there is actually a surprisingly large amount of competition in the Rhode Island area. When looking at one of the closest competitors in the area that is located in Middletown, RI; the town next to where VNS is located, we see that their website offers some information that cannot be found on the VNS webpage that may cause customers to be drawn to them instead. To start, when navigating the competitors website we found that all of the information we needed to find was found right out in the open because each section was clearly labeled. One section of their website that we found particularly helpful was the FAQ's. FAQ's are the questions that the businesses know that people are going to ask about the company and makes it easy to find the information because all of the questions that you might have are all answered in one place. A recommendation that we think could immensely improve the satisfaction of the potential customers when viewing the website would be to include a FAQ's section that included answers to questions that could have to do with VNS as a whole or even a tab from the Help at Home section that included this information. The types of questions that could be answered in this section include anything from what the company does to how one pays for the service to whom will be doing the actual visits. On the competitors webpage they ask the question about the rates at which clients are charged. While they do not give any specific numbers seeing as how all people who are receiving home health care are going to be under different circumstances and situations they do offer a free at home consultation for

the first visit. From what we said earlier in the paper about how a free consultation could potentially draw in more customers from looking at VNS's competitor websites this seems to be true. A lot of the competitors that we have taken a look at offer a free consultation because geriatric care is such a personal service and every customer should be treated with the best care that VNS can offer and learning the situation instead of just jumping right into working with a client could help out a lot not only for the business but for the satisfaction of the customer.

Another aspect of the VNS website that we have found that could potentially draw more customers to VNS, and in particular the Help at Home section would be its location on the website. Right now when we go to the VNS website we see that there are tabs at eye view that show home care, hospice, rehabilitation, and community health services with the link at the top of the tab when clicked on. The one thing that we do not find right away is the location of the link to Help at Home. When visiting websites with services similar to Help at home we have found that it makes the navigation of the page easier when all of the information services are listed under the tabs at which they correlate with. Our suggestion for Judy Mason would be to move her Help at Home service out of the community help tab and into the home care tab. Since Help at Home is a geriatric care service which brings health care into a client's home it makes more sense to have it in the home care section. Also moving to the home care section will assist in getting Help at Home more views because when viewing a website the first thing a potential customer is going to look at is in the first tab.

When looking into the future endeavors of the marketing of VNS we have established a contingency plans if the company wishes to pursue its work with the University. When looking at the differences between VNS's homepage and the homepage of some of the competition businesses we have found that they lack a promotional video, which many of the competitors

have. In this video VNS would be able to include an overview of the company along with insight as to what is going to occur on the visits. A factor that we had talked about is how certain people may be drawn away from having strangers come into their home. However after watching this short video where the potential clients will be able to see the actual people who may be helping them; they are able to put names to the faces even before they become a client. Our plan would be that if VNS would like to continue with this project it could be assigned to another group from next semester's class where they could work hand in hand with the either a film or journalism major to make a quality video that can not only be placed on the homepage of VNS but as well on other marketing tools.

All of these ideas are in the process of being completed and whether they are in their preliminary stages or almost finalized, we feel all of these can benefit VNS positively. It is clear that VNS views our class as advantageous to their business and is using us effectively. It has been a pleasure to work with them so far and we are all excited to see which systems work in the company's future. VNS provides an invaluable service that needs more publicity and we hope to help them achieve that goal. They understand that they need to be open to new ideas and to be more up to date on their advertising, which is a good first step. If they continue to try to implement their goals they will see an increase in their company's client list. It comes down to making sure the right people know about the company and once we tap into the correct market we feel that VNS will see a dramatic increase in business.



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