Ad Campaign Puts up Walls to Open UCH to the Public

Your client is an academic medical center that has earned back-to-back number-one rankings in quality and safety among its peer institutions. It’s the best hospital in the metro Denver area and the state of Colorado, according to US News and World Report. Count it among a relative handful of hospitals redesignated three times as a Magnet nursing facility.

So the obvious ad campaign centerpiece for this highly decorated client is…walls?

That’s right. University of Colorado Hospital this month unveiled a new series of ads that play on the line, “If our walls could talk.” Say what?

There is a method to the apparent madness, said Norm Shearer, creative director for Cactus Marketing and Communications, which created the ads in conjunction with the hospital’s marketing team.

“We felt we had an opportunity to express the knowledge that is here at an academic medical center,” Shearer said. “There is an amazing amount of knowledge under one roof.” As the creative team thought about bringing that knowledge to life, they mused about the stories the walls could tell — if they could talk.

Thus, the campaign features billboards with photos of nondescript hospital walls and doors contrasted with arresting one liners, such as, “If our walls could talk, you’d hear how we saved a pregnant mother’s heart without her baby’s skipping a beat.”

A story you’d like to hear more of — and you can, at the micro Web site created for the campaign. (Hospital employees should try it from home this month, due to video restrictions while Information Services upgrades Internet bandwidth.)

Elsewhere, users will be directed to the stories from the hospital’s public site, from digital flash banners, or from pay-per-click ads. Local print ads and others in geographically targeted national publications, as well as Colorado Public Radio spots, will also point the way to the site. In addition, three-dimensional “walls” installed at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts and Coors Field solidify the campaign.

The multiple paths lead to a consistent message, said Bill Sonn, senior director of marketing, communications and public relations for University of Colorado Health.

“Our aim is to remind the public of what University of Colorado Hospital stands for: superior outcomes and advanced care they typically can’t get elsewhere and facilities built for collaboration and patient-centered care,” Sonn said.

One big challenge, Shearer said, was to communicate that message in a way that didn’t rely on the overused technique of patient testimonials.

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“We wanted to do something that expresses a story, but you see testimonials done for everything in advertising,” Shearer said. “That led to figuring out how to do it from the wall’s perspective – to do a testimonial without it being a testimonial.”

To become the walls’ ears, as it were, the Cactus creative team toured the hospital with members of the marketing team, collecting stories from patients and providers, and later winnowing the list down to the half-dozen or so most compelling and resonant. With patient approval, they constructed the stories and filmed patients and providers as they related their hospital experiences.

Sonn credits Cactus and the marketing team for crafting a campaign that brings stories of the hospital’s clinical expertise and compassion to those who might not be aware of them.

“Every other day of the year, we’re marketing the same kinds of stories and qualities in other ways, usually tied to specific docs and conditions in ways designed to bring specific types of patients in for care more immediately,” Sonn said. “This is our annual chance to tell the stories to much wider audiences in much more dramatic and inventive ways.”