

TV studio helps Hartford HealthCare shape its message

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Reprising her former role as a TV news anchor, Hartford HealthCare spokeswoman Rebecca Stewart interviewed Dr. Craig Allen about addiction treatment for a new 30-minute special produced entirely in-house.

As major employers acutely aware of their public image and always looking to build their brands, many large hospitals, universities and companies have sophisticated public relations departments, staffed by trained communicators and, often, former journalists.

Emailing press releases and staying in touch with local reporters is a longstanding PR strategy, but some big players have taken their efforts many steps further.

Hartford HealthCare recently built a \$35,000 TV studio at its Newington offices that allows its marketing team to produce entirely in-house, longer, multi-camera programming that it pays to air on local news stations and distribute freely through social media and other channels.

Its first 30-minute special shot in the new studio was broadcast earlier this month on NBC Connecticut/WVIT — called "Hope After Heroin: Stories of Recovery" — examining the destructive opioid epidemic that caused more than 400 overdose deaths in Connecticut last year.

The production — shot and assembled in a studio featuring four high-definition cameras, high-end switching equipment, computer monitors, a teleprompter and a soft purple-backlit set — is a form of "content marketing" or "brand journalism", serving as hybrid news and advertising content.

Not quite an infomercial

It's not quite journalism, many would argue, since Hartford HealthCare has a financial stake in the services the program promotes, as well as total control over the content. But it's no infomercial either.

Given its high-quality production and newsroom feel, a casual viewer could be forgiven for thinking the special was created by a professional news team.

That's because, in a sense, it was.

Narrating and conducting interviews for "Hope After Heroin" were former FOX 61 anchor Rebecca Stewart and her colleague Tina Varona, a former TV news reporter at a CBS station in Miami and at News 12 in Norwalk. Both are public relations staffers at Hartford HealthCare, Stewart since 2010 and Varona since 2013.

An HBJ reporter was invited to view a final session of filming for the special early this month at the new studio. Taking occasional cues from producer Nick Dethlefsen — Hartford HealthCare's in-house videographer — Stewart and Varona delivered their lines with textbook TV news intonation, often in just a few takes.

Also working on the shoot as executive producer was Dethlefsen's wife, Melissa Dethlefsen, a marketing manager at Hartford HealthCare since 2013 and a former WFSB producer.

Evolving strategy

In between takes, Stewart said that the in-house production capabilities Hartford HealthCare has built since her hiring six years ago gives it a leg up in an age where newsrooms are shrinking and it's tougher to get desired coverage.

Hartford HealthCare still fields inquiries from reporters and sends out press releases and pitches. But that's just part of their evolving strategy.

"If you're not visible in this very visible market, someone else will be," Stewart said. "We aren't waiting for people to cover our stories."

Keith Fontaine, Hartford HealthCare's vice president of marketing and branding, said "Hope After Heroin" provides useful information and promotes the Hartford HealthCare brand at the same time.

He said the health system is in the midst of a deliberate transformation of how it communicates with the broader public.

"We're storytellers," Fontaine said. "We know change is coming. People consume information differently now."

Building awareness

The Newington studio is actually Hartford HealthCare's second production facility. It built another smaller studio in 2012 at its Hartford Hospital campus that beams video feeds of its doctors to TV news teams seeking medical experts for interviews — another way to build brand awareness.

The larger Newington studio, however, allows Hartford HealthCare to deepen its content-marketing capabilities.

In addition to the stories of three Connecticut residents who overcame their addictions with the help of treatment, "Hope After Heroin" includes interviews with Hartford HealthCare officials on the Newington set. A flat-screen television set between two chairs, where interviewers and subjects sat, displayed the title of the special and Hartford HealthCare's pinwheel-shaped logo.

The program, which Hartford HealthCare paid NBC to air (separately from the station's news broadcast), is peppered with references to Hartford HealthCare addiction-treatment services and how to contact them.

NBC aired the program as part of an advertising deal it signed with Hartford HealthCare in November.

The deal also included the airing of Hartford HealthCare's annual fundraising gala in February, brief "Connect to Healthier" segments during Sunday morning news broadcasts, and traditional commercials, according to Hartford HealthCare, which declined to disclose what it spent on the package.

Storytelling with a motive

Fontaine's team of ex-journos are certainly storytellers.

But "Hope After Heroin" is storytelling with a motive: The promotion of Hartford HealthCare's addiction-treatment services.

Absent from the program were appearances by any experts from competing hospitals, or any mention of competing addiction-treatment programs in the state.

Stewart and Varona interviewed Patricia Rehmer, senior vice president of behavioral health and former commissioner of the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Also appearing were Dr. Craig Allen, medical

director of Hartford HealthCare's Rushford Treatment Center, which provides mental health and addiction treatment, and Hartford Deputy Police Chief Brian Foley, who handles media relations for the department.

Stewart said she understands that a journalist would likely include other outside sources for balance and fairness, but the former news anchor said her mission is to promote her employer's physicians and expertise.

"We are a part of the solution to this opioid crisis and we are proud to share these stories of recovery," she said. "We're not putting other hospitals' websites on there and we certainly wouldn't expect them to list ours."

Separating news from paid programming

Susan Tully, NBC Connecticut's general manager, said in an interview that the station is careful to separate its news operations from its paid programming.

Though "Hope After Heroin" has a newsy feel to it, Tully feels it's easily distinguishable as separate from her station's news programming. It's branded throughout with Hartford HealthCare's logo, she noted. NBC's news graphics and staff also weren't used.

"Viewers know it's not a news time period and it's not replacing news," Tully said. "They're branding it, so it's obvious."

Tully said she has found Hartford HealthCare's content — beginning with its shorter Sunday segments that helped build trust between the two organizations — to be well produced and its team to be professional and understanding of the invisible wall between news and advertising that's considered sacred by the highest-quality news organizations.

But not everyone is pleased with the spread of content marketing.

An academic view

Benjamin Bogardus, an assistant professor of journalism at Quinnipiac University who has worked for TV news stations in Connecticut, Washington, D.C., Texas and other areas, said he has seen paid content at his previous jobs, but nothing quite like "Hope After Heroin."

As a viewer, he said the program had "the highest-quality TV news production values."

But as an educator of aspiring journalists, Bogardus said he felt NBC did not adequately label the program as paid content, which he thought was especially important given that it was shot in the style of a news special.

He said there should have been a disclaimer at the start of the program (which can be viewed on Hartford HealthCare's [website](#)) explaining it was sponsored content.

"[The viewer] needs to know who is paying," Bogardus said. He worries some viewers could mistake programs like "Hope After Heroin" as unbiased news programming.

"If it was so clear this was paid programming and not news, why go through all the trouble of trying to make it look like a newscast?" he asked.

Tully said a second June 19th airing of the program would include a disclaimer.

Content marketing is here

While he has his reservations, Bogardus said he's under no illusion that content marketing is going away, given a fragmented media industry that has forced news organizations to compete with new technologies for ad dollars.

Sara-Beth Donovan, senior vice president of Avon ad agency Mintz + Hoke, is Hartford HealthCare's media buyer.

She thinks content marketing works.

"The world of content integration can result in a more meaningful delivery of that message," Donovan said.

Donovan said that a decade ago, a health system producing something like "Hope After Heroin" would have involved many different parties, including a media buyer, PR firm and advertising agency. A health system creating the product entirely in-house and owning the content afterwards was a pipedream, she said.

"Now the world works in an integrated fashion," she said.

