



From Groundbreaking to Grand Opening: Crafting a Community-Centered Communication Strategy for Rural Hospital Launch

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Jamie Allyn, Account Supervisor, Strategic Communications, MERGE



Session Objectives

Even lean PR/comms teams within regional health systems can achieve outsized results when their people, strategies, and stories are tightly integrated

Throughout our session, we'll discuss:

1. Developing integrated communications plans designed to achieve strategic goals for small, rural healthcare organizations
2. Engaging rural and aging patient populations through tailored communications strategies
3. Nurturing media relationships and leveraging strategic PR/comms resources effectively

Session Agenda





Project Overview

Strategic Approach

**Workshop:
Create-Your-Own
Strategy Playbook**

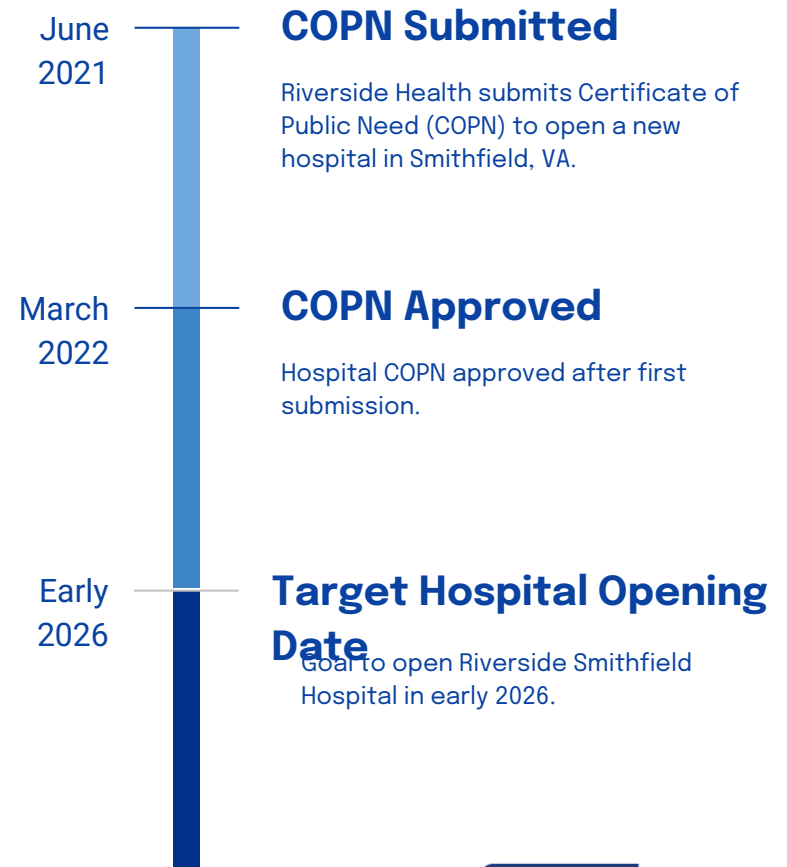
**Strategy in
Action**

Overview & Challenges

Mobilize grassroots community support, earn first-try COPN approval

Challenges We Faced

- Federally designated “medical desert”
 - Eastern Virginia’s Isle of Wight County
 - Rural community (population ~9,000)
- Not-for-profit hospital
- Universal healthcare headwinds (e.g., Medicaid cuts)
- Lean team



Strategic Vision and Communication Goals

Our Vision: To be “the community’s hospital” and deliver “the human experience”

1

Support

hiring and generate
awareness of open
jobs

2

Acquire

patients and inform
community of progress &
care availability

3

Celebrate

the benefits of
Riverside Health in Isle
of Wight County

Exceeded Opening Day Expectations



300 Team Members



23 ED Patients



16 Pieces of Media Coverage

Within 24 Hours	9 EMS transport patients (first one 24 minutes after opening) 5 medical-surgical patients 52 diagnostic images
Within 48 Hours	59 ED patients 1 ICU patient 13 medical-surgical patients 106 diagnostic images
6 Months After Opening	9,068 ED visits 949 admissions 769 surgeries 21,762 diagnostic images



Society for Health Care
Strategy & Market
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Research Driven Strategy



Channel Strategy

Understanding our audience's habits, we prioritized radio and print opportunities, with a secondary focus on local broadcast/digital stories



Strategic Messaging

We emphasized “new” and “coming soon” messaging



Audience Drivers

We focused on common community needs and desires (e.g., specialty care access)

Isle of Wight Community Member Habits:

- Engage with traditional media (radio/newspaper)
- Prefer broadcast cable TV/satellite dish
- Use internet for local information
- In-the-moment shopping/decision-making
- Low brand loyalty

Integrated Storytelling Approach

Drive meaningful **impact** and establish community **trust** by uniting media and agency partners through consistent storytelling across all channels



The Timeline

Building Strong Hyperlocal Media Connections

Launched a quarterly series with the Smithfield Times and Jessica Macalino to spotlight RSH's key milestones and foster community engagement.



Tools to Enable Consistent Storytelling

Strategy Playbook

“The single source of truth”

- PR/comms timeline
- Strategy
- Messaging: Key messages/if-asked Qs
- SME identification: Topic expertise/media training
- KPI tracking

Media Briefing Book

A unified resource for hospital executives

- Media opportunities: When, where, and with whom
- Anticipated questions
- Key messages to convey
- Links to existing coverage

Digital Press Kit

Ensuring brand standards and consistency

- Organization logos
- Project fact sheet/timeline
- Visual assets
 - Drone footage
 - Event photos
 - B-roll



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**Our Strategy in
Action**

Section 1 – Audience Media Habits & Communication Approach

- Who are you talking to?
- Where do they get their information?
- Earned vs. paid.
- Hyperlocal vs. regional vs. national.

Section 2 – Key Messages

- What's in it for your audience/community?
- What expectations need to be set?
- What forthcoming changes or operational phases need clear, proactive framing?
- What confusion can we preempt?
- What is the Call to Action (CTA)?

Section 3 – Subject Matter Expert (SME) Bench

- Who is appropriately positioned to deliver the message(s)?
- Where is third-party validation needed?
- How can you elevate community voices?
- Should you pair leadership with real-world voices?

Section 4 – "If-Asked" Statements & Reputation Management

- What gives you, your team and/or leadership angst?
- What operational gaps exist?
- What is your approved "non-answer answer"? How do you answer tough questions consistently while bridging back to patient care, safety, and community commitment?
- How will you handle leaks or premature news?

Section 5 – Milestone Events, Priority Calendar & KPIs

- What are your micro-milestones?
- Does every milestone need the same push?
- What is the true goal of each event?
- How will you measure success across media placements, audience impressions, and strategic impact?
- Are your KPIs realistic and aligned with the communication goals?



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Strategy in Action

Cultivating Media Relationships

Cultivate strong local media partnerships through consistent engagement and personalized storytelling

- ✓ Regularly attend editorial meetings
- ✓ Understand each outlet's preferences and editorial approach
- ✓ Tailor storylines
- ✓ Build/share a digital media press kit to ensure brand consistency

These strategies led to nearly **4.5x** more media coverage than anticipated

Media Coverage By the Numbers

123

Total Media
Placements

Drove 1800+ direct
engagements with community
members across social media
platforms

108

Total Pieces of Local
Coverage

Almost 11x more than
the anticipated KPI

15

Total Pieces of Trade
Coverage

5x more than the
anticipated KPI

35.5M

Estimated Unique Impressions

Equivalent to everyone in Isle
of Wight and Surry counties
hearing about RSH 755 times!

6

Media outlets in attendance
at the Dec. ribbon-cutting
event, including all **3 local
broadcast stations**

\$1.1M

Ad Value

Equal to Riverside buying
monthly digital subscriptions
to the Smithfield Times for
~2/3 of Isle of Wight County²⁰
residents

Social Media Buzz

278

Total Mentions

95

Unique Authors



Community Engagement and Open Houses



Team Members

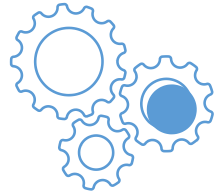


EMS/First Responders

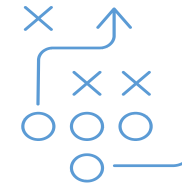


Our Community

Key Takeaways



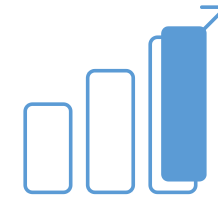
Coordination and consistency are critical



Flexibility must be baked in



Trust takes time



Relationships unleash lasting results



Questions?

- Please be sure to complete the session evaluation on the mobile app!

About April Weston

System Director of Brand and Integrated Communications
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April Weston is the System Director of Brand and Integrated Communications at Riverside Health, where she leads enterprise-level communications strategy across service lines and stakeholders. An expert in integrated communications within complex health care organizations, she specializes in aligning internal and external messaging to organizational priorities through practical, scalable frameworks. One example was her central role in guiding storytelling efforts around the opening of Riverside Smithfield Hospital. With more than 12 years of experience, she brings a practitioner's perspective grounded in real-world execution. April also serves on Riverside Health's People and Culture Leadership Committee and is Vice Chair of the VHHA Communication Officers Committee.



About Jamie Allyn

Account Supervisor, Strategic Communications
MERGE
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Jamie Allyn is an experienced healthcare public relations professional with a strong grasp of strategic communications and client service. As an Account Supervisor for MERGE, she uses her communication skills to support day-to-day account management for her clients and execute highly integrated PR and communications programs. Thought leadership, executive visibility, content planning, strategy, crisis/issues management counsel, and content are all areas of expertise. With more than 8 years of experience in strategic communications, she is deeply passionate about brand storytelling—cultivating relationships with local, trade, and nationally renowned media outlets to elevate brand visibility among her clients' strategic target audiences.



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