



Your best advocate has their own reason to care

By **Michael Petrone** | October 2026

When a health system finds itself in a public dispute, its first instinct is often to make its case. Leaders gather the facts, develop messages, correct inaccuracies, and explain what's at stake.

That may be exactly what the situation requires. But whether the dispute involves a payor, a policy decision, or another consequential issue, people know the organization has something to gain or lose from the outcome. Inviting other voices to join the conversation can help build credibility and sway opinion.

Those voices are most credible when they have an independent stake in the outcome. A consequence for patients, employees, or the community at large gives someone a reason to enter the conversation and make the case from their own perspective.

A health system that has earned trust and built strong relationships over time has a foundation for healthcare advocacy. It can help others understand what's at stake and why the outcome may matter to them, too.

A good reputation doesn't automatically create advocates

Health systems become part of the fabric of their communities through the care they provide, the people they employ, and the relationships they build over time. Those connections shape how people understand the organization, what they trust it to do, and whether they see its interests as connected to their own.

Someone can respect the hospital and value its contribution without wanting to wade into a public disagreement on its behalf. Healthcare costs and coverage are complicated, and a sympathetic stakeholder may see legitimate interests on more than one side. Others may have something at stake without feeling comfortable taking a public position.

Generating overt advocacy requires more than goodwill. It starts with understanding where the interests of people outside the organization intersect with the health system's own.

Know who has something at stake before the issue becomes contentious

Third-party advocacy should be part of strategic preparation whenever an issue could affect people outside the health system. Start by identifying who will feel the consequences, what could change for them, and how much those changes are likely to matter.

A health system facing a difficult payor negotiation while healthcare costs are under intense scrutiny will have a different set of affected stakeholders than one preparing for union activity or legislation that could change access to care.

The issue consuming leadership's attention may have consequences that reach far beyond the immediate dispute. A policy fight can affect local access. A labor issue can affect the workforce and community. Strategic communications can help uncover those connections, understand which ones matter to different stakeholders, and support them with evidence.

Doing this work early gives the health system time to understand where credible advocacy may emerge and make sure potential advocates have the information they need before the issue becomes contentious.

Your strongest advocates have their own voice

Strategic communications brings more than messaging to a consequential dispute. Research can help the health system understand what different audiences already know and believe about the issue. Communications teams can identify the channels that reach them and determine where outside voices could add credibility or reach people the hospital can't reach as effectively on its own.

Once potential advocates become involved, strategic communications can give them the foundation they need to participate confidently. That means making complicated issues understandable, providing evidence they can trust, answering questions, and making sure they know what's changing as negotiations or the public conversation evolves.

Once advocates have that foundation, the hospital has to give up some control over how they use it. An advocate's perspective should determine how the issue becomes an argument. Someone concerned about workforce disruption will explain the stakes differently from someone focused on continuity of care. They may emphasize something the hospital wouldn't have chosen or use language the communications team wouldn't have written.

That's part of the value. Third-party advocates extend the conversation into audiences, relationships, and perspectives the health system doesn't own. Their credibility comes from understanding the issue well enough to decide what matters to them and speaking about it in their own voice.

Use an advocate's influence where it matters

Third-party advocates bring credibility and relationships that reach beyond the health system. Their influence may be strongest with an employer, a group of physicians, a community organization, a decision-maker, or another audience that already knows and trusts them.

Strategic communications can identify where those relationships are most likely to affect the conversation. An advocate may have more impact in a private meeting or an employee communication than in a public statement that reaches thousands of people.

The right channel follows the advocate's existing influence. Give people the information they need to participate effectively, then help them reach the audiences where their perspective carries weight.

Third-party healthcare advocacy extends the health system's reach into relationships and conversations it couldn't enter on its own.

Your best advocate has their own reason to care and their own reason to speak.