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Nursing firm creates reality show Web program aims to recruit, promote

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As a travel nurse, Alycen Skorvonek goes anywhere there is a staffing shortage.

Skorvonek has worked on an Indian reservation in Arizona and in an emergency room in San Francisco. Now she is planning her next move, to Southern California to be on a reality show.



NELVIN CEPDDA / Union-Tribune

Alan Braynin, CEO of Access Nurses, sat in front of a projection of the company's reality show Web site, created to help recruit nurses, promote the profession and the industry.

Skorvonek is going to participate in "13 Weeks," a creation of a Access Nurses, a San Diego nurse staffing company. The local company created the Web-based reality show to recruit staff, and to promote the company and the profession.

Demand for travel nurses is up because hospitals are struggling to find qualified permanent staff during an ongoing nursing shortage. The need is more pronounced in California, where hospitals must meet state staffing requirements. The need is expected to grow as baby boomers age.

The staffing industry is competitive, dominated by giants such as San Diego's AMN Healthcare and filled with dozens of smaller companies like Access. Each company is working to recruit nurses to meet the growing demand.

Access Nurses' unique marketing effort captured attention quickly. Nurse applications to the company increased 20 percent after the show's Web site launched.

The show will follow six nurses through their jobs at Orange County hospitals and personal lives at an oceanfront mansion in Newport Beach. The company begins filming soon and will air the show online in November. The company said it is working on possibly launching it on cable television later.

Access Nurses chief executive Alan Braynin said the show is more than a recruiting stunt. Braynin described it as an opportunity to build the small company's brand and increase awareness of travel nursing.

"The show is a small part of our growth plan," Braynin said.

Access provides nurses for several types of staffing needs but focuses primarily on travel nursing, which is the largest portion of the nurse staffing industry.

Braynin founded the company in 2001 and its revenue has grown from \$1 million in its first year to more than \$20 million in 2004, according to the company.

Braynin, whose background is in Web-based staff management, said he plans to set the company apart from other smaller staffing companies with more up-to-date methods, such as Internet-based payroll and recruiting. He said Access Nurses already had an adequate number of applicants, but the show has helped. The company said it has hundreds of nurses on contract, although it would not disclose an exact figure, and works with hospitals nationwide.

"The market really took off in the '90s," Braynin said. "We can still have a major impact in it."

Industry analysts say the nurse staffing market is on the cusp of growth but remain cautiously optimistic. A recent report by Harris Nesbitt, an investment company, said demand for nurse staffing should continue, particularly in travel nursing. The primary hurdle for travel-nurse staffing companies is availability of nurses, and many companies cannot fill all their requests.

Although Braynin said the company has not suffered from lack of applicants, he is always eager to sign new nurses. Marketing experts say "13 Weeks" is a potentially effective tool.

The use of reality shows to recruit staff was "absolutely inevitable," said Robert Thompson, professor of popular culture and director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University.

Interest in other professions has been stirred up by television, such as the spike in law school applications when "L.A. Law" was popular and the recent increased interest in forensic science thanks to shows such as "CSI."

Others agreed, saying Web-based television-style shows already are emerging as a popular medium.

"If it's something people really get into, they have a great vehicle," said Peter Sealey, adjunct professor of marketing at the University of California Berkeley. "It's a movement to one-to-one media. A commercial message embedded in entertainment is much more powerful."

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