

# EDUCATING EMPLOYEES ABOUT THEIR BENEFITS: A SIX-STEP APPROACH

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More than 87 percent of employees say that benefits play a significant role in their choice of employer. And 86 percent say that benefits play a significant role in their decision to stay with their employer.<sup>1</sup>

## EDUCATE EMPLOYEES ABOUT THEIR BENEFITS: A SIX-STEP APPROACH

With the Affordable Care Act (ACA) changing the game—and benefits representing 30 percent of a company's total compensation spending<sup>2</sup>—it's never been more important to help employees understand their benefits.

Unfortunately, 40 percent of employees don't understand their benefit options.<sup>3</sup> Half of employees waste up to \$750 each year because of mistakes made electing their benefits (with only 16 percent feeling confident they won't make those mistakes). And 86 percent simply elect the same benefits every year, whether the plans offered meet their needs and budgets. Or not.<sup>4</sup>

For many employers, this lack of understanding is a problem that can result in decreased productivity, increased health care costs, and dissatisfied employees. What's the solution? Better communications.

When employees receive the information and education they need to break through the confusion and choose and use their benefits wisely, they're more loyal, productive, and satisfied as well as happier. And they're not the only ones who benefit—72 percent of employers that communicate effectively see a positive impact on medical cost trend and are 1.7 times more likely to outperform their peers.<sup>5</sup>

So how can you be one of them? By making the following six steps a part of your communications planning process.

## STEP 1: LISTEN TO YOUR EMPLOYEES

The best way to ensure communications are effective and fresh is to create a strategic plan that's the foundation for sharing information with audiences over time. The first step involves something we do every day—listen.

Listening means understanding where your employees are at the beginning of the communications process, so you know firsthand what they need and want to know, and which issues matter most to them. Asking employees about their preferences and perceptions positions you as a caring and informed employer, and allows you to:

- Learn more about what they're thinking, doing, hearing, sharing, and feeling so you can best target messaging.
- Identify breakdowns in the current approach to communications.
- Determine where to spend money most effectively.
- Craft meaningful communications that support your business objectives.

There are many ways to query employees, with technology making it easier and more cost effective than ever before, as outlined in the table on the following page. Whichever way you go, be sure to apply what you learn to mapping your communications approach.

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You may think you know what's on the minds of employees, but unless you ask, you're just guessing. Employee-listening activities can provide confirmation and insights that are critical in creating communications that move the dial.

### RULES OF THUMB: LISTEN TO YOUR EMPLOYEES

**Set the appropriate expectations.** However you choose to listen, be sure to set the appropriate expectations on the front end for how you'll use employees' input, so as not to leave anything to the imagination, or set them up for disappointment.

For example, let's say you want to gauge employees' readiness for a consumer driven health plan (CDHP). You haven't implemented one—yet—but you're thinking about adding it to your current list of options for the next plan year. By asking questions about it during the listening process without framing them appropriately, you may wrongly send the message that a CDHP will be employees' only option going forward. That's why it's risky to ask questions without stating your intentions early.

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1. Employees Speak Up About Benefits Communications, Guidespark, April 2014 Survey Report  
 2. Employer Costs For Compensation, December 2009, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics  
 3. 2011 ADP HR/Benefits Pulse Survey on Employee Benefits Tools, www.shrm.org, accessed April 14, 2014  
 4. 2012 OE Survey of Aflac Workforces Report, www.shrm.org, accessed April 14, 2014  
 5. Hero, Best Practices Scorecard, 2012

So what are some common takeaways from the listening process that may affect your overall approach? That depends on your areas of focus, including what you ask, how, and why. You may, for example, learn that, despite your best efforts, employees still understand very little about the ACA. They're confused about what they have to do to get their wellness incentives. They don't read their emails (implying it's not a good place to reach them). Or they'd really like opportunities for two-way conversation with senior leaders. You may learn that the enrollment guide you distribute online isn't getting home to spouses, that current messaging isn't resonating with employees, that they're disconnected from the goals of the organization, or that important gaps exist in meeting their need for information.

The sky is the limit in terms of what you may uncover when you go to employees directly to understand their needs, perceptions, and preferences. Once employees know they're safe to talk freely, they will let you know what's working for them and what's not. Your goal is to find the listening methodology that makes the most sense for your organization and apply what you learn toward creating an effective communications strategy.

## LISTENING TO EMPLOYEES: METHODOLOGIES

TACTICS	HOW TO DO IT
Create a virtual sounding board	Put an ad in current communications that you're looking for employees to provide feedback on issues, approaches, and messages related to enrollment, wellness, health care reform, consumerism—whatever is the focus of your communications. Let them know they won't have to attend any meetings, their participation is voluntary, and they'll only need to dedicate an hour or so each month to the cause. Then, create an email list of those who agree to join and reach out only when you need input.
Distribute an online poll	Use an online survey tool to poll stakeholders. Know what you'd like to get out of their responses and craft your questions accordingly. Be brief and pointed, and make sure questions are written so they don't bias respondents toward certain answers.
Conduct focus groups	Focus groups allow you to both "push" (give) and "pull" (get) information from participants, educating employees in the process. While a more thoughtful approach is often appropriate, you can do focus groups quickly and simply depending on how urgently you need information. Determine whose input you need and gather them around a table. Always use an outside objective party to lead the groups so participants feel safe sharing information honestly.
Interview executives	Interviews can be as short as 15 minutes and are a great way to get buy-in from leaders, understand their expectations, and engage them in sponsorship. (To learn more about why that's important, see Step 4 on page 9.)

## STEP 2: MAP YOUR APPROACH

Mapping your approach involves a thoughtful planning process that ties communications strategies to business objectives. It's at this point in the process where you want to define the problem you'd like communications to solve inside your organization, and document a structured approach for managing it in a communications plan.

The plan should include an outline of your goals and objectives, key messages, stakeholders, and audiences (both inside and, if appropriate, outside the organization), how you'll reach them, what you'll tell them, and how you'll define the measures of success (see Step 5 on page 10). Answering the following questions can help you get started:

- **What are your business goals?** How about your communications goals, which should align with the needs of the business? What do you ultimately want employees to think and do as a result of your efforts?
- **Who will be affected?** Remember all your audiences when planning, and not just employees. That includes managers, leaders, and human resources professionals; even outside vendors and other third parties, dependent spouses, and other family members, depending on your objectives.
- **What does each audience need to know and when?** This may vary based on role, location, and employment status. For example, managers generally want to know how to support employees, employees want to know how they're affected, and leaders want to know how they can best provide sponsorship. Now's the time to lay that out and figure out who needs to know what and when.
- **What's the best way for each audience to receive information?** Will you use print, electronic, social, or mobile communications? What about face to face? How about a mix of each (ideal)? As you evaluate your options, keep in mind that people receive information differently. They also use media differently: online users are action oriented, while print is good for laying out detailed and complex concepts. Your plan needs to appeal to all types.
- **Where is the best place to reach audiences?** Intranets work well for employees who can easily access them, but may not be best for employees that don't sit behind a desk (e.g., in retail or manufacturing environments). For this group, consider other ways to reach them beyond traditional home mailing; you may want to take advantage of internal distribution methods not typically used for communications to bulk ship to locations, or add social and mobile media to your approach. Focus on best practices inside your organization and use what you learned while listening to go where your audiences want you.

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Did you know that 85 percent of adults use the Internet, 76 percent use it at home, and 62 percent of adult cellphone owners use their phones to go online (a figure that's doubled since 2009)?<sup>6</sup>

6. Inside Benefits Communication Survey Report, August 2012, Benz Communications

## STRATEGIES AND TACTICS CLARIFIED: EXAMPLES

### STRATEGY IS THE “WHAT”

What do you want to do?	Prepare managers to support employees during Open Enrollment. Help employees understand the new CDHP. Increase participation in on-site health screenings.
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### TACTICS ARE THE “HOW”

How will you do it?	<p>Prepare managers to support employees during Open Enrollment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide them with an employee handout with key milestone dates.</li> <li>• Give them a short presentation on how to enroll for use in team meetings.</li> <li>• Send daily emails during enrollment with updates and tips for supporting employees.</li> </ul> <p>Help employees understand the new CDHP:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mail a printed “Guide to Decide” to homes outlining how the plan works.</li> <li>• Conduct a webinar that can be recorded and/or hold open meetings where employees can ask questions.</li> <li>• Create a short video that explains the CDHP, including cost scenarios and information about decision-support tools; post on benefits portal outside the company firewalls.</li> </ul> <p>Increase participation in on-site health screenings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do a desk-drop flyer with information about the screening and incentives.</li> <li>• Send a fact sheet to managers on the screenings and incentives and ways to engage and support employees.</li> <li>• Have leaders get screened and blog about their positive experiences.</li> </ul>
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Strategy is what you are doing and why. This means that you have already set your objectives and you know where you are going. When crafting your strategy, try to keep your eyes on the big picture. Tactics relate to how you will implement your strategy and the tools you will need to be successful.

## RULES OF THUMB: MAPPING YOUR APPROACH

- **Brand your benefits.** Employees are more likely to look at company-branded information rather than vendor-branded information.<sup>7</sup>
- **Consider what employees want.** Research shows that most employees prefer live presentations, email, and direct mail as ways of communicating.<sup>8</sup>
- **Make sure communications get home.** The goal is to reach 1) female spouses, who make 70 percent of the family health care decisions, and 2) all family members, who make up a majority of most employer’s health care costs.<sup>9</sup>
- **Make sure tactics appeal to all types of learners.** There are three: 1) audio (need to hear it), 2) visual (need to see it), and 3) kinesthetic (need to touch and interact with it). Make sure your communications make sense for all of them.
- **Less is NOT more.** To the contrary, repetition is key. Think about communicating seven times, seven different ways during a campaign.
- **Create timelines.** They’ll help you stay on track. Share them with those on the project team to make sure there’s consensus on timing.

## STEP 3: TARGET YOUR MESSAGE

There are a lot of ways to target your message so it's meaningful for your various audiences. Start by identifying the different stakeholders in your organization. Then, anticipate how they'll be affected by the message and what they most need to know (e.g., how to meet the requirements of the ACA, enroll for the next plan year's benefits, register for their health screening, get the most out of their CDHP, or navigate the company's new private exchange website, etc.).

Here are a few ways to break out your audiences:

- **By role:** As mentioned earlier, different groups may need different things. For example:
  - Leaders want to know how to provide sponsorship.
  - Employees and family members want to know how they're affected.
  - Managers (often the first place employees will go when they want information) want to know how they can best support employees.
  - Human resource professionals want to know how to best support everybody.
- **By age/demographics:** For the first time in history, workers span five generations. As a result, they often have different preferences based on when they were born.<sup>10</sup> See the chart to the right for insights into their defining characteristics and let that inform how you shape content.
- **By learning style:** As highlighted above.
- **By location:** Consider that workers in retail or manufacturing environments may be affected differently by some messages than those who sit in an office setting. That's where evaluating each group's need for information and available media makes sense.
- **By participation:** Based on who's in what plan and/or program and how things promise to change.

The bottom line is this: If the messages you want to deliver make sense for the bulk of your audience (like announcing the Open Enrollment period or promoting general tips for how to stay well during flu season), it's okay to create one set of messages and promote them widely.

If, on the other hand, what you need to say will mean different things to different people (like creating a campaign to educate people on getting a preventive colonoscopy or to let them know the plan they're currently enrolled in is being eliminated), it's best to be more thoughtful about who you need to address and how. Then, repackage the message accordingly.

### ALWAYS LEAD WITH THE "WIIFME"

One message that remains meaningful across all groups is "What's In It For Me" or the "WIIFME". To get and keep your employees' interest, lead with the "WIIFME" in all

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#### TRADITIONALISTS (PRIOR TO 1946)

Defining Traits (DT): Sacrifice, loyalty, discipline, respect for authority

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#### BABY BOOMERS (1946 TO 1964)

DT: Competitive, hard work, long hours

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#### GENERATION X (1965 TO 1976)

DT: Self-reliance, eclecticism, free agents, work-life balance, independence

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#### MILLENNIALS (1977 TO 1997)

DT: Immediacy, community service, cyberliteracy, tolerance, diversity, confidence

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#### GENERATION 2020 (BORN AFTER 1997)

DT: Hyperconnectedness, mobility, media savvy, life online starting in preschool, reading books on e-readers

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7. Seventh Annual Study of Employee Benefits, Today & Beyond, Prudential 2012

8. Employees Speak Up About Benefits Communications, Guidespark, April 2014 Survey Report

9. Open Enrollment Boot Camp, Employee Benefits News, June 2008

10. Shel Holtz, Ragan Communications, "Employee Communications Boot Camp", accessed April 14, 2014

of your communications and stick with it throughout—using it as context for making tangential points.

For example, if you're raising monthly premiums, don't start with how much benefits are costing the company and why that's painful for the organization. Instead, start with the news that employees will need to share in more of the cost of their health benefits and explain why. Be honest. Emphasize what employees need to know and what actions they need to take in response. That will give you a better chance of getting their attention—and keeping it.

## RULES OF THUMB: TARGET YOUR MESSAGE

- **Be honest and transparent.** Always be forthcoming about any changes that will affect employees and the rationale for the change. Employees may not necessarily like it, but they're more likely to accept change if they understand the reason behind it. When introducing change employees are likely to view as negative, don't sugar coat it. That doesn't mean you need to be negative—you can give any message a positive tone—but be up front. Tell employees what you can do, along with what you can't.
- **Use simple language and avoid jargon whenever possible.** Not only is benefits jargon complicated and confusing to employees, but they don't trust it. You'll lose credibility. And if you must use specific benefits language, be sure to define terms as you use them.
- **Promote information hubs early and often.** Make sure you have someplace for employees to go for more information and make it easy for them to access.
- **Resist the urge to give employees information they don't need.** Stay focused. It's easy to get lost in the details—especially as they affect you as an employer—but employees don't need to know everything. Only the things that affect them.
- **Be ready to adapt your message.** Especially as plans, programs, processes, legislation, and anything else inside or outside your organization change in ways that affect employees.
- **Don't ignore the rumor mill.** You need to keep on top of the informal communications channels inside your organization in order to address misinformation and stop it from spreading.
- **Pay attention to outside messages.** Monitor the mainstream press and social media to stay ahead of what employees are hearing about any changes to the way they can access benefits so you can keep them accurately informed. Sign up for the same resources they do. Know what's happening outside, so you can address it inside.
- **Stay party neutral, when applicable.** Especially when it comes to the ACA. Industry research shows the law's acceptance falls along party lines. Given that, stick with the facts.

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Changing or discontinuing a plan or a program that's part of your benefits offering? If it's available to all or most employees, make a general announcement. Then, send a more targeted communication to current participants letting them know it's going away and helping them see the benefits of their alternatives.

## STEP 4: SHOWCASE YOUR LEADERS

Business leaders and executives play a critical sponsor role in any communications process, whether it's about helping employees understand some new aspect of their benefits, adopt a more consumer-like mentality, or embrace change. In any case—especially where there is significant change and/or issues to be communicated—people want to know their leaders are with them. That means helping senior executives do the right thing by creating ways for them to be visibly and actively involved in the communications process.

There are lots of ways to showcase leaders. Consider a leadership blog or even a vlog (video blog), quarterly face-to-face forums, emails, desk drops, flyers, posters, seeding dialogue on a social intranet or on social media forums, and the like. The key is giving leaders a voice so employees know that what is being communicated is important and their leaders are part of it.

By communicating regularly and authentically, leaders build trust across the organization and ensure the effort is a success.

### RULES OF THUMB: SHOWCASE YOUR LEADERS

- **Consider how you'll showcase leaders when you map your approach.** Be strategic about building leadership tactics into your plan—make sure messaging aligns with the broader campaign.
- **Make sure executives sound like real people and not just company talking heads.** People connect with other people, not institutions. That means having leaders take a less formal tone, convey honesty, show themselves in the same situations as employees, and use language employees can relate to.

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Part of your listening process can include conducting executive interviews. These interviews can be as brief as 15 minutes or as long as an hour (however much time you feel you both need and can get). Use this time to share information about your communications objectives and approach, and get leadership feedback you can use to inform planning. This is also a great way to build consensus and buy in, and get leaders engaged in the communications process.

## STEP 5: MEASURE AND REFINE

Good communications is a loop that never ends: It requires you to continually revisit your plan to make sure it's effective. To do that, identify a set of measures during the planning process and then check in on pre-defined dates to see how things are going and whether your original approach still makes sense.

With that said, there are several ways to measure success, including benefit or program participation and utilization, costs, number of page views and subscribers, comments (both online and in person), etc. You can also measure through listening efforts, creating baseline polls and focus groups, even gathering useful information by the "water cooler".

As you measure the effect of your efforts, it's critical to use what you learn to re-evaluate your communications plan and make any necessary updates. This will ensure your plan remains current and effective. You should also consider the following when making modifications:

- The needs of your organization (e.g., are you making changes to plans, programs, policies, employee value proposition, etc.?).
- New feedback from employees and other stakeholders telling you they need more information.
- Guidance related to the ACA and other compliance issues as it comes from official sources.

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Developing a written communications plan takes effort. But once it's in place, this documented approach will make your ability to communicate year round easier.

### RULES OF THUMB: MEASURE AND REFINE

- **Identify measures early in the communications planning process.** Be sure they make sense in the context of what you're trying to achieve.
- **When re-evaluating your plan, determine whether there's a gap in the information you're already providing to audiences.** Do they need something more or different from what you originally anticipated? If so, it's time to make some changes.
- **Set up an ongoing process on the front end for periodically evaluating your plan and making easy changes.** That can include, among other things, regular listening activities and communications throughout the year that can be used to convey real-time information.

## STEP 6: COMMUNICATE YEAR ROUND

As employers increasingly ask employees to take more responsibility and accountability for their health care spending, it's critical to give employees the tools and information they need to be successful. That means talking to them more than just during the Open Enrollment period. Instead, create touchpoints throughout the year that help them best choose and use their benefits.

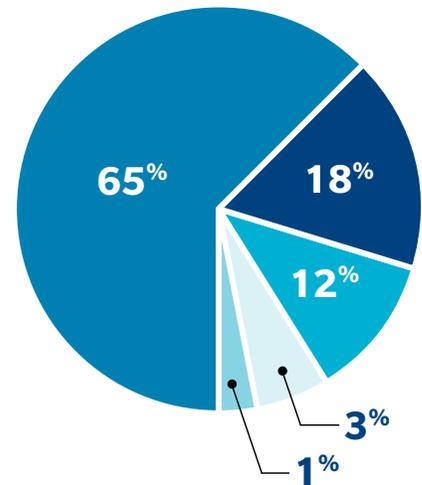
Some ideas for doing this:

- Promote one benefit a month on posters or digital signage.
- Distribute a quarterly newsletter with tips and updates on how to be a good consumer of health care services and the tools available to help.
- Hold open forums once a quarter and showcase leaders, so employees can ask questions and engage in dialogue.
- Post infographics that appeal to visual learners and offer digestible bits of information.
- Invest in a social intranet that allows for two-way conversation; keep it dynamic by seeding topics; or take advantage of social media channels, as appropriate.
- Start a benefits blog or vlog.
- Celebrate employee success stories through monthly flyers and annual events.
- Create a benefits portal, so employees can quickly and easily access information and share it with family members.

### RULES OF THUMB: COMMUNICATE YEAR ROUND

- **Build ongoing communications that allow you to share important information when it happens.** That way, employees will always know how their benefits work and what's expected of them.
- **Know that you can't communicate too much.** To the contrary, when you're just getting sick of saying it, employees are just starting to get it. So keep going!
- **Remember that the more often you communicate, the more satisfied your employees.** And the more likely they are to stay with you. (For more, see chart to the right.)

### FREQUENT COMMUNICATIONS IMPROVES LOYALTY



HOW OFTEN COMPANY COMMUNICATES      VERY LIKELY TO LEAVE THEIR JOB IN THE NEXT YEAR

Only at Open Enrollment or new hire enrollment	65%
2 times throughout the year	18%
3 to 5 times throughout the year	12%
6 to 9 times throughout the year	3%
10 or more times throughout the year	1%

Source: 2012 OE Survey of Aflac Workforces Report, [www.shrm.org](http://www.shrm.org), accessed 4/14/2014



For more information about how to best communicate with your employees, visit [www.TrionCommunications.com](http://www.TrionCommunications.com) or contact your Trion representative.

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