

CREATING RESULTS WITH BENEFITS COMMUNICATION

Three steps to drive clear, cost-saving campaigns with measurable outcomes



A White Paper
by Jennifer Benz
Benz Communications

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Since I started working in employee benefits in 1999, a lot has changed. Most notably, in that short time, employers have moved almost completely away from paternalistic approaches in health care and retirement, putting tremendous responsibility on employees to make complex decisions and plan their own futures. The latest pushes toward health care consumerism and aggressive wellness programs are just another step in this evolution.

It is more important than ever that employers not only provide programs that support employees' health and financial security, but also invest in educating people and supporting them to make good decisions. Employees are relying on you to help them have a successful life now—and in the future.

Still, even with the best intentions, companies of all sizes struggle with benefits communication. Since we originally published this white paper in 2010, our ingredients for successful benefits communication have been used by thousands of companies. In this new version, we have laid out our proven process for effective communication. If you follow the three steps outlined, you will be able to accomplish more with less effort. Your communications—and in turn your benefits programs and your employees—will be successful.

Please let us know how you do!

Contact us at results@benzcommunications.com.

Cheers,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jm', with a stylized, flowing script.

Jennifer Benz, CEO

Benefits are where the needs of employees and their families and the needs of a business intersect. Benefits account for almost 30% of total compensation spending.¹ An effective communication program helps your company make the most of its investment.

Effective communication also helps you find and retain top talent, keep them (and their families) healthy and productive, reduce overall health care costs and even improve your company's financial performance.

- » Companies that are highly effective at communication are 1.7 times as likely to outperform their peers.²
- » In today's workplace, 61% of employees are likely to accept a job with lower pay but better benefits.³ Show candidates that what you have to offer separates you from the pack.
- » A company is four times more likely to lose talented workers in the next year if employees are not satisfied with wellness promotion.⁴ Get the word out!

THREE STEPS FOR STRATEGIC EMPLOYEE BENEFITS COMMUNICATION

Creating results through effective communication is easier than you think. Our approach is rooted in three critical steps:



¹ Employer Costs for Employee Compensation, December 2009, US Bureau of Labor Statistics

² Clear Direction in a Complex World. How Top Companies Create Clarity, Confidence and Community to Build Sustainable Performance, 2011-2012, Towers Watson

³ Retention Rides on a Well-Communicated Benefits Plan, September 2012, Employee Benefits News

⁴ The Wellness Imperative: Creating More Effective Organizations, 2010, The World Economic Forum, "Right Management (a Manpower Company)"

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GET ONLINE

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Getting people to pay attention to their benefits starts with making information accessible. The best way to do that is by putting benefits information on a standalone company-branded website, outside the corporate firewall.

When you put your benefits online, you give employees and families a single destination to act on their benefits or find answers to questions—anywhere, anytime.

For your employees, your benefits website will help them find the information they need fast—minimizing frustration, enhancing user experience and inspiring trust. It will also help them see their benefits holistically, rather than as a patchwork of providers and administrators.

For you, a benefits website provides a platform for ongoing communications. Even better, it will save you thousands in printing or mailing costs. Two-thirds of HR/benefits professionals say print and postage costs consume most of their benefits communications budget.⁵ A benefits website lives on, long after dense enrollment guides are forgotten or get thrown away.

Getting online is the most important investment you can make in your benefits communication.

REAL-WORLD TIP

THREE WEB DEVELOPMENT TERMS TO KNOW



Outside the firewall. Although firewalls keep your IT department happy, they don't make decisions easier for employees and their families. Keep your benefits information available on the general web so that all employees—and other decision-makers at home—can have easy access.



Mobile optimization. This means designing and formatting your website specifically so that it's easily viewed and usable on a smartphone, tablet or other mobile device. Although it might seem strange to create a website this way, the reality is that smartphones are everywhere. More than half (56%) of Americans now own a smartphone, 35% own a tablet and 26% own both.⁶ People are making decisions on the go, connecting to information and each other whenever they need. If people and information are this connected via mobile devices, your benefits should be, too!



Responsive web design. This method of designing allows websites to respond to their environment. So, when a user switches between devices—say, from laptop to tablet, or tablet to mobile phone—they see the website in the most optimal layout for that particular device. This eliminates the need for designing a separate version of your website for mobile or tablet users.

⁵ Inside Benefits Communication Survey Report, August 2012, Benz Communications

⁶ Pew Research Internet Project, 2013

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GET ONLINE

85% of adults use the Internet, and 76% of adults use the Internet at home.⁸

Where to start

► *Do some soul-searching, then develop your strategy.*

A communication strategy ties together your goals and communication channels—including your benefits website. Very few companies document their communications strategy, a crucial step in connecting benefits communication with overall benefits program and business goals.⁷

- » **Know your company.** What drives your business results? How do your benefits attract the right people? How do they keep people engaged and focused at work? How will your efforts be measured?
- » **Know your employees.** Who are they? What kind of families do they have? What motivates them? What keeps them up at night? How do those answers change based on job category? What about other demographics?
- » **Dive deeply into your benefits.** What does total compensation look like today, and how do you expect it to change in the next three years to respond to business needs? What behaviors do you want to change? Don't forget about the administrative piece. Where do your employees get stuck? Where are the messy areas of the company's experience?

REAL-WORLD FACTS

ARE MY EMPLOYEES ONLINE?

In a word, yes! Take a look at the latest statistics:

- » 85% of adults use the Internet, and 76% of adults use the Internet at home.⁸
- » 63% of adult cellphone owners use their phones to go online⁸—a figure that's doubled since 2009, showing that mobile tech is quickly closing gaps in Internet access in underserved demographics.
- » Online is exactly where employees want you to be—80% of Gen Y and Gen Xers want their benefits online.⁹

⁷ Inside Benefits Communication Survey Report, August 2012, Benz Communications

⁸ Who's Not Online and Why, September 2013, Pew Research Center

⁹ The 9th Annual Study of Employee Benefits Trends, 2011, MetLife

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GET ONLINE

► *Brand your benefits.*

Market your benefits the same way you market your company. Be remarkable. When it comes to employee communication, your “competition” isn’t limited to what happens at the water cooler. You’re also competing with all the messages and news your employees see every day, including Facebook, instant messages and tweets. Branding will help you capture attention and get credit for the money you invest. That means investing in a “look and feel” that is unique to your company and furthers your company’s goals.

REAL-WORLD FACTS

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Employees are more likely to look at company-branded information rather than vendor-branded information. However, only about a third (32%) of employers say they brand their communications, while half (50%) say their materials are a mix of the company’s brand and vendor’s brand.⁹

► *Build a feedback loop.*

Listen to your employees and their families by creating feedback channels, surveying them and conducting focus groups. Start with simple approaches like email surveys or focus groups—both of which are very effective. You want to learn about how your employees think and feel, what they know and what they want. Armed with this information, you can develop persuasive, effective communications that achieve the intended results.

REAL-WORLD FACT

TRY TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Forty-nine percent of employers use employee surveys to gain feedback about benefit programs.¹⁰

¹⁰ Seventh Annual Study of Employee Benefits: Today & Beyond, Prudential, 2012

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KEEP TALKING

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In the past, employees heard from you about once a year—when it was time to enroll—and they received a massive data dump.

There was a time when that was sufficient, but now, employees are shouldering more of the financial risk for today's health expenses and tomorrow's financial security. They need to take a more active role in their health and finances to understand their plans and participate all year long.

Support employees by giving them tips, reminders and updates throughout the year using every communication vehicle possible. Focus on pain points and missed opportunities, like FSA and HSA deadlines and simple ways to take advantage of benefits. Offer smart ideas like upping your 401(k) contribution when merit pay increases are announced.

Where to start

► *Give your employees context.*

Share the background on your benefits package. Connect business issues with specific benefits. Be relevant. If the nightly news is talking about health care reform, don't be afraid to give the company's point of view or acknowledge that you don't have all the answers. If changes are coming, tell employees exactly what changes you're making to their benefits plan—and why. That way, year-to-year changes won't be so alarming.

When you communicate this way, employees will trust and depend on you in good times; then they're much more likely to listen during times of uncertainty. Your benefits website can tie into the broader communication efforts—building trust and a two-way dialogue on all business issues.

► *Embrace social media—it's here to stay.*

Too many people still think of social media as a way to waste time, share pictures and play games. But social media tools give us easy, low-cost and effective ways to communicate throughout the year. They are perfectly suited for benefits.

Ninety percent of online users also use social media. Many of your employees are accustomed to using social media to get the information they need; there's no reason you shouldn't take advantage of these tools for benefits, too.

Getting started doesn't have to be overwhelming. Focus on:

- » **Starting small.** Incorporating a blog into your benefits website is the easiest way to get started with social media—and one of the least expensive ways to keep your website fresh.
- » **Setting a realistic schedule.** Posting a few times a month is plenty. Update your communications calendar so you know what's going out when.
- » **Keeping dialogue open.** Let employees comment on a blog, send questions via Twitter or attend virtual meetings. Then, answer their questions and concerns. Keeping the door open is the best way to earn respect and loyalty from your employees. You can even set up your blog so that it's moderated—meaning no comments are posted until you review them.

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KEEP TALKING

► *Talk to your people like people.*

"The company needs to control costs." "The company must make changes." "The company provides a health care plan."

Phrases like that don't connect to real people's lives. Benefits are really about employees and their families—remember they aren't benefits experts. You'll communicate most effectively when you think about their needs—and talk to them like real people without jargon and legalese.

Ask yourself what's meaningful to employees and their families. The magic in benefits communication happens when what's good for your employees is also good for your company. Create a strategy that puts your employees first and articulates your goals in plain language. Your employees will see what's in it for them, and you'll get better outcomes.

REAL-WORLD TIP

TAKE OUR TWEETS—AND MORE TIPS!



We've written hundreds of benefits tweets you can use: Check them out on twitter.com/benefitstip. Want more social media tips? Download our Social Media Starter Kit at benzcommunications.com/resources.

► *Make it easy for employees to take action.*

Benefits used are benefits valued. The best way to help employees appreciate programs is to encourage their use. You already have the information you need to do this—the next step is to take that information and organize it in a purposeful and strategic plan that guides your ongoing communications efforts.

- » **Have a call to action.** Focus on action-oriented communications. Creating a sense of urgency will help overcome inertia.
- » **Make it relevant.** Give your employees targeted information, tips and examples based on their age and family situation.
- » **Do the math.** Be specific about what will affect costs and how new cost changes compare to current choices. Show real numbers and don't shy away from details that help with understanding.
- » **Take it step by step.** Be clear about steps to enroll or how to use vendor tools, so employees don't get frustrated with a cumbersome administrative system or process.

REAL-WORLD TIP

LOSE THE LEGALESE



Sec. 2715 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act reads: "The standards shall ensure that the summary is presented in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner and utilizes terminology understandable by the average plan enrollee." It means that you can't summarize benefits using legalese. See our point?

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WORK SMART

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You don't have to do it alone! There are countless tools and resources out there that you can use *for free* to help you meet your goals. You can also promote free services to your employees that support your benefits strategy.

Your health plans, administrators and other program providers should be delivering top-quality communication materials that you can incorporate into your own efforts. Always have high expectations of how your brokers, consultants and other vendors support your communications efforts.

Where to start

► *Beg, borrow and leverage.*

Look for existing resources, toolkits, tip sheets and more to coordinate and personalize. We've worked with several organizations that offer rich employer resources.

Choosing Wisely is a national movement to improve conversations between doctors and patients to ensure the right care is delivered at the right time. We had the pleasure of creating the *Choosing Wisely Toolkit* in partnership with Consumer Reports, National Business Coalition on Health and Pacific Business Group on Health. With tip sheets, articles and more, it is a rich resource that complements health care consumerism and wellness campaigns. Visit NBCH.org to find out more.

Local and national business groups on health are incredible organizations that exist to make your life easier, offering toolkits, content and countless other resources. If you haven't already, get in touch with your local organizations.

Choosing Wisely is a national movement to improve conversations between doctors and patients to ensure the right care is delivered at the right time.

REAL-WORLD FACTS

THE CHOOSING WISELY INITIATIVE

The Institute of Medicine estimates that up to \$750 billion, or roughly 30%, of health care spending is wasted on unnecessary services. To eliminate the disconnect between a patient visiting the doctor and receiving an unnecessary test, the *Choosing Wisely* initiative aims to improve doctor-patient communication and help patients make more informed, effective health care choices.

Employers also play a role, as nine out of 10 Americans has difficulty acting on information about health and health benefits.¹¹ Recognizing this, the Pacific Business Group on Health, National Business Coalition on Health, Consumer Reports and Benz Communications created *The Choosing Wisely® Employer Toolkit* with ready-to-use materials for employers to integrate into existing communications about health care education.

¹¹ National Plan to Improve Health Literacy, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010

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WORK SMART

► *Own the experience by integrating vendors and channels.*

Chances are, more than a dozen vendors administer your benefits programs and services. If you let each vendor communicate independently, you overwhelm your employees and miss an opportunity to coordinate complementary programs. Understand your vendors, plans, processes and channels—knowing where employees are likely to get frustrated or confused. Then find ways to glue them together for employees. Don't let frustration with an administration issue take the luster from your shiny benefit program.

► *Find ways to get face-to-face.*

Almost everyone would love to have you sit down with them, one-on-one, and explain your benefits and tell them what to do. That's not practical, but you don't have to lose a personal touch altogether. Simulate the sentiment of a one-on-one conversation by using:

- » **Video conferences and webinars.** These can be a nice substitute for in-person meetings. Consider doing a series throughout the year or targeting the needs of different employee groups. You can also use that format for Q&A sessions.
- » **Managers.** Empowering your managers connects them to the company more closely and helps keep employees engaged, too. Give managers a communications preview—before distributing to employees—and request their in-person engagement. You may not want managers trying to answer benefits questions, but they should always know where to direct employees and understand the context for changes.
- » **Peers.** Identify informal leaders to support your message or ask for testimonials. Or, try to tap into existing employee networks or onsite resources.

► *Measure your results.*

After all of your hard work launching that big program, it is easy to let measurements fall by the wayside—but don't take your eye off the ball. Various data sources like the ones outlined below can help you measure your progress and give you a big-picture view of what's working and what can be better. Use that insight to fine-tune your communications, refine your approach and get closer to your goals.

Volume and quality of communications	Program participation/use	Health and financial outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Web traffic » Email click-through and open rates » Meeting attendance (in person or online) » Communications surveys » Focus groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Health plan enrollment » Wellness participation » Preventive care utilization » Financial wellness programs » EAP utilization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Aggregate biometric data » Claims data » Retirement plan and HSA balances

Feeling inspired? We hope so! Armed with inspiration and information, you're one step closer to breakthrough results with your benefits communication.

GET MORE FROM YOUR BENEFITS

Learn how you can increase results on your benefits communication.

Call us: 888-550-5251

Email us: results@benzcommunications.com

About Benz Communications

Since 2006, we have been honored to create remarkable employee benefits strategies and campaigns for some of the country's most prestigious employers, administrators and providers. Our clients include Fortune 500 companies and many on *Fortune's 100 Best Companies to Work For* list.

We are also honored to share our expertise with you. Please find more on our website and blog:

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