



## Health Care Professionals: A Hidden Market For Voluntary Benefits

BY JIMMY HINTON

You're probably familiar with selling health care insurance. You sell it to individuals and you sell it to companies. But what about those who provide that care to your clients and prospects? The health care industry itself consists of a variety of businesses — hospitals, doctor's offices, skilled nursing facilities, assisted living facilities, etc., composing a diverse market that is wide open to the idea of group benefits.

What makes these health care professionals more receptive to a variety of health plans is that every day they see how individuals are affected by high medical expenses. Being on the front lines, they know that medical treatments can cost upwards of thousands of dollars in bills that their health insurance will not cover. So health care workers who see an increase in their own major medical deductibles and out-of-pocket expenses are likely very open to voluntary gap coverage

and other benefits. To protect themselves from expensive medical bills, they may be open to spending a small amount each pay period for this gap coverage.

If you've ever tried to join the benefits market in general, you know it can be challenging because the approval process for this market consists of many layers and gatekeepers, such as HR professionals.

And if you're already marketing group benefits to those working in the health care industry, how can you solidify your presence? If you're not offering health care to these professionals, then how can you get involved? The answer for both is simple: Expand your business to include employee-paid voluntary benefits.

### Managing benefits program costs

Health care employees face annual group premium increases, just like many other com-

panies do, and they're using the same cost-management strategies as other employers. Although you aren't likely to see a lot of health care employers embracing the consumer-driven health care approach (CDHP), you may see them raising their major medical deductibles. To compete for skilled workers in a tight labor market, companies offering health care must have a competitive benefits program. If they offer high-deductible health plans (HDHPs) but don't provide the option to fill gaps in coverage, they may no longer be able to compete for coveted employees.

But it doesn't need to stop at gap coverage. Short-term disability and voluntary cancer and critical illness products are also in demand because health care employees have seen the expenses that critical care treatments can incur.

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## Effective benefits communication

I once asked a hospital administrator how she explained their benefits plan to hospital employees. She pointed to a benefits statement software package on a shelf, still in its original wrapper, and said she had paid \$10,000 for the package yet didn't have enough staff to implement it. By applying effective communication efforts, such as one-on-one meetings with employees, you can remove the burden of communication from the health care HR staff. It can also help the employer retain valuable employees by clearly laying out the professionals' total compensation, including benefits.

Many employees don't understand their benefits or appreciate what their employer provides. When conducting group meetings and

individual sessions with health care workers, they may tell you that they had no idea that their employer paid an additional 30 to 40 percent for benefits on top of the employees' salary. When they hear this from a third party, employees may receive it much more warmly than when the employer prints out a benefits statement and mails it to their home or stuffs it in their paycheck envelope.

Some of the main reasons people leave a job are for more money or better benefits. So a one-page snapshot of the company's comprehensive benefits statement can be a low-cost way to show employees why they should stay with their current employer. In other words, when you tell a licensed nurse practitioner who makes \$30,000 a year that she has an additional \$12,000 a year in ben-

efits coming her way, she realizes her total compensation is \$42,000. Suddenly, that other hospital that offers only a few thousand dollars more in addition to salary might not look so appealing.

The health care market represents a tremendous growth opportunity for your business, and a voluntary benefits strategy coupled with benefits communication could be the ticket to get you in the door. Even those who serve your current clients need health care coverage — these prospects have been under your nose for a long time. It pays to help them, too.

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