

Better Benefits Communication Means Greater Engagement

▶ There's no off-season when it comes to benefits enrollment. Here is how health insurance brokers can ensure a winning season by keeping in touch with benefits managers throughout the year.

By Kyle Addy

Sports metaphors are often used to drive home key points in business. Here's one of them: There is no off-season.

That means when it's time for benefits enrollment, your group clients have reviewed the options and are knowledgeable and prepared, and their employees should already have a good idea of available benefits options. Your clients want a smooth enrollment period that goes according to plan, with strong engagement and high participation.

But if you think you're already delivering the best benefits communication service to your clients, and your clients in turn think their employees understand their benefits, you might be surprised to learn there's still more you can do.

Research shows fewer than 40 percent of employers have a formal benefits communication plan. Yet a majority of them — 90 percent — believe their approach is just right, according to LIMRA's 2016 "Help Employers Connect the Dots" report. But their workers disagree: Only a third of employees in the Colonial Life/Unum U.S. Worker Benefits Survey, which was released last year, said they understand their benefits very well.

Once you've realized there's much more that can be done with benefits communication, how do you effectively seize the opportunity?

First, make sure you really know your audience — that's a crucial element of effective communication. The same is true when recommending insurance products to fit a client's needs. Know their business, what your client's employees want and anticipate changes that might be needed

for benefits plans from year to year.

You can achieve this only through relevant, frequent communication with your clients throughout the year, not simply just before and during open enrollment.

It's crucial to maintain relationships with human resources departments — or, at smaller companies without traditional HR, benefits administrators — that extend well beyond the enrollment period.

they feel about the place they work. In fact, employees who rate their benefits education highly are also much more likely — 76 percent — to rate their workplaces as very good or excellent, according to the Colonial Life/Unum U.S. Worker Benefits Survey.

Helping your client foster a better, long-term relationship with their employees drives up retention, morale and productivity

COMMUNICATIONS DISCONNECT

When it comes to benefits communication, there's a significant disconnect between employers and employees.

Fewer than 40 percent of employers have a formal benefits communication plan.

90 percent of employers believe their approach is effective.



Only **a third** of employees say they understand their benefits very well. Nearly all — **98 percent** — agree it's important.

Build a Bond With Workers

Strong benefits communication does more than help your clients' employees make better benefits choices during open enrollment. It also helps your clients hold on to their top talent by increasing job satisfaction and workplace loyalty.

Research shows there's a strong, direct tie between how employees feel about their benefits communication and how

— and all three affect expenses and revenue. The cost of replacing a worker — recruiting, screening and training — represents a huge drain on an employer's resources, but that's exactly what happens when a worker leaves for perceived greener pastures.

Now add in the challenge of performance-managing out a disengaged employee, who later must be replaced. Of course, great benefits communication

Sources: LIMRA, Help Employers Connect the Dots, 2016; Unum, 2014 U.S. Worker Benefits Survey, 2015; Colonial Life survey, 2013.

alone isn't going to change a slacker into a superstar, but the positive culture created by committed employees is closely connected to the success of the company itself. Executing a great benefits communication plan in partnership with the client creates tremendous value for them and increased appreciation of your relevance.

Ongoing Dialogue

Keep the benefits conversation with clients going all year, and encourage them to communicate with their employees. Here are some simple low- or no-cost ideas to build benefits and health knowledge beyond enrollment season:

» **Benefit of the month** — Speak to clients about running a series of articles on their employee intranet site explaining in plain language different benefits and how to tell whether they're a good fit. Just because you explained the nuances of disability coverage six months ago doesn't mean an employee who's now expecting a baby will remember it. Keep the stories archived where they're easy to find and refer back to.

» **Promote free external resources** — There are several websites that have a wealth of information on benefits and health.

» **Be the on-site expert** — As benefit consultant, you're uniquely positioned to be an expert resource for employers. Offer to help them by holding on-site open hours or brown-bag lunch-and-learns through the year to explain different benefits and answer their questions.

The Bottom Line on the Bottom Line

Avoiding turnover is only part of the cost-control formula. There are hard dollar costs associated with employees not understanding and using their benefits to protect their health and well-being. Not taking advantage of preventive care coverage such as health screenings and flu shots for fear of the doctor's bill can lead to more serious illnesses and lost time at work that might have been avoided.

If your company offers more than one health plan option — for example, a lower-deductible, higher-premium traditional

preferred provider organization plan and a high-deductible "consumer-driven" plan with lower premiums — it's important for your employees to understand how each works so they can make the best financial and health decisions for themselves and their families.

Health savings accounts and flexible spending accounts can help employees plan for and manage health care expenses — but only if they participate in them. And that won't happen if they don't understand them.

Your clients have other responsibilities to keep them busy throughout the entire year. Year-round, ongoing communication about benefits can better prepare them when open enrollment comes back around — and retain a loyal client for you. [in](#)

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