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### Open Enrollment Communication Planning

In an ideal world, planning for this year's Open Enrollment started the day after last year's Open Enrollment ended. But we know the reality, so if you have an opportunity to advise your client to begin planning now, you can also help them avoid last minute scrambling in September or October.

According to anecdotal evidence, people spend more time evaluating cell phone calling plans than they spend reviewing their benefit choices. [Good communication](#) can change that, so by taking a page from those cell phone marketers your client can make a real difference in employee benefit knowledge and satisfaction come open enrollment time. With some practical tips, a realistic timeline and some thoughtful planning, they can be on their way to a winning open enrollment communication strategy.

#### Communicating Using Basic Concepts

- **Build on experience.** Employers can look at what worked and what didn't work in prior years. There have been some terrific flops in marketing cell phones, but learning from past mistakes helped to turn those marketing flops into successes.
- **Set up a timeline and be realistic.** Your clients have plenty to do before Open Enrollment begins, so their communication plan should build in some cushion for interruptions that could sidetrack them.
- **Communicate early, often and be consistent.** Change is stressful for both employers and employees. Your clients can reduce everyone's stress level (including yours!) by planning and implementing their strategy to help educate and prepare employees for what's coming.

Employees need time to understand and act on new information, and employers need to reinforce their messages on a regular basis. They can use a combination of printed, online and face-to-face communications before and during Open Enrollment to drive a consistent message.

- **Get Personal.** We understand information better when we can relate to specific examples. Incorporate real life testimonials into your client's communications. Consider offering employees online modeling tools to customize the "what if" scenarios.

Employers shouldn't forget to develop communication that also includes the spouse and dependents. As members of their health plans, they are a key audience.

- **Cut through the noise.** Eliminate the use of jargon. Use plain language creatively to engage and educate your employees.

## Communicating Using Basic Concepts, cont'd...

- **Avoid information paralysis.** You know what it's like – there is so much information to digest that it can overwhelm employees. Of course, it's important to be thorough with any communication, but we need to try to avoid the "more is better" syndrome.

Charts, graphs, tables, "At a Glance" and "Highlights" help to simplify key concepts. They improve an audience's ability to understand complex topics and don't overwhelm them.

**Next, build on the basics by producing materials that can be used as building blocks for the following year.** Think about enrollment kits and benefit summaries. Try to extend the shelf life of communications by eliminating logistical information such as meeting sites, dates and deadlines. It's a simple fix and very cost effective. The logistical information is better handled in memos, posters and cover letters, not in the body of the documents.

**Increase your effectiveness by creating a brand for Open Enrollment.** Your clients are spending a great deal of time, energy and a significant portion of their overall organizational budget on benefits. When communication materials are branded, visibility is automatically increased, as is awareness and your client's role as the plan sponsor. Help them brainstorm around a theme to make it fun – be creative! Then, it's relatively inexpensive for employers to develop and design worksite materials to publicize their theme.

**Provide multiple ways to respond to inevitable questions.**

Best practices include:

- using a benefits hotline
- planning group meetings and allowing time for individual meetings as needed
- publishing frequently asked questions (FAQs)
- referring employees to [www.quotit.net](http://www.quotit.net) for assistance with defining terms
- set up a temporary help desk or benefits email address
- incorporating blogs and podcasts for younger workers and dependents

**Use the plan provider.** A number of our clients ask their health plan provider(s) for help in developing – or even paying for – some or all communication materials. But make sure that any materials the provider supplies match your client's goals, key messages and branding requirements. Boiler-plate, off-the-shelf materials may be appropriate for some uses, but they can easily dilute your client's branding efforts and detract from the key messages they want to deliver.

**Follow up Open Enrollment with an annual benefit statement.** What better way for employers to emphasize the value of their benefit plans than by providing employees and their families with a benefit (or total compensation) statement? This is a great way to remind employees of the value of their benefits and confirm their recent benefit elections as well.

**Looking toward next year...** Your clients can begin to lay the groundwork for next fall by reiterating their messages throughout the coming year. They can make these messages part of their ongoing benefit communications with employees throughout the year. They should also remember to keep their message out there to reinforce and improve understanding of their strategy.

BeneCom has over 17 years of experience helping employers communicate with their employees. Let us help you develop a strategy and tactics that will help your client successfully communicate in a way that educates, increases satisfaction and engages employees in a cost-effective fashion. **BeneCom Associates offers effective benefit communication strategies for every budget.**

To learn more about us call **860.674.2626** or visit us [online](#).