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Communicate benefits story well to help staff “get it”

With costs for health care and retirement rising, persuading employees to understand and appreciate their employee benefit programs is more important than ever. You can improve appreciation and understanding if you tell your benefits story using these elements.

First, your story must be relevant. Yet remember, relevancy, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder. In other words, your audience determines what is relevant, not you the employer.

When an employee receives something on benefits, the first question they ask is “What’s in it for me?” If you don’t answer that question in the first 30 words, the employee moves on.

Here’s a simple example. How relevant is your retirement program to a single 25-year-old? Conversely, how significant is your retirement program to a 50-year-old employee? Of course, the answer is a retirement program is not very important to most 25-year-olds, and its likely very relevant to a 50-year-old.

How about your paid time-off program? It’s probably important to all your employees.

Health care is important to most employees, yet it’s most relevant to employees with families. You need to start telling your benefits story to the groups who care the most. Otherwise, you’re speaking to an empty room.

Consider targeting your benefits communications to subgroups of your employees based on age or family status. For example, basic retirement communications could be presented to all employees, yet more detailed information could be provided to employees age 45 and older.

After relevance, the second most important ingredient in telling your benefits story is understanding.

Especially with benefits communications, messages must be in plain, simple terms. If an employee finds a topic relevant, yet can’t get through the gobbledy-gook of jargon, acronyms and mysterious sounding words, your story gets lost. The solution is to create your benefits communications as if you were telling the story to your cousin Carla or your uncle Bill, who don’t know anything about benefits. It must be clean, simple and direct.

Avoid legal and technical terms such as “vesting,” “medically necessary,” “waiving coverage,” “termination,” long words, compound/complex sentences and sentences more than 20 words long.

If you must use a technical or legal term, provide a glossary that defines the word in simple terms. Using more common words might make a document longer, yet it will improve understanding. Most word processing programs can help you with understanding because they check for

HEALTH BENEFITS



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▼ be said, heard and read. The reason this is critical is because adults learn best and easiest in one or a combination of three ways: hearing, seeing or by experience.

Try educating your employees about their health-care benefits through a PowerPoint presentation given by a dynamic speaker, an article in the company newsletter that uses a series of simple pie charts, postcards mailed home, a poster series in the lunchroom, and a DVD that employees can pop into their home computers.

Finally, keep in mind that most employees aren’t thinking very deeply about your benefits most of the time. The only time the majority of your employees think about benefits is either when they need to

readability.

Plan to tell your story in as many different ways possible. A master storyteller uses his hands, eyes, voice and movement to capture and hold the audience’s attention. Similarly, you need to use print, audio-visual, the computer, and small group meetings. You also need to use pictures, graphs, tables, color and worksheets. Words must

use them or when a decision has to be made.

Otherwise, most of your employees are skimming the surface and reacting to cues. Psychologists tell us that most people are skimming about most subjects most of the time. It’s only when we care deeply about a subject that we become thoughtful.

What this means for your benefits communications is that **you must target your communications to both skimmers and thinkers**. Posters and postcards are for skimmers; twelve-page booklets are for thinkers. Detailed presentations are for thinkers; seven-minute highlight videos are for skimmers. Headlines and highlights are for skimmers; long stories are for thinkers. Email blurbs are for skimmers; links to stories are for thinkers.

If you want to get the most appreciation and understanding for your employee benefits, you need to effectively tell your benefits story. This means the story must be relevant, understandable, told using a variety of media and targeted to both skimmers and thinkers.

Even a good story is wasted if it’s not told well.

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