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## Resolve to communicate better, a lot better

By Jennifer Benz

*January 1, 2009*

I'm not one for New Year's resolutions. From a personal perspective, they've always seemed corny, trite and ineffective. But, since starting my own business, they have taken on a whole new meaning. The holidays are often the first deep breath we've taken since open enrollment and are a great time to reflect back on what worked well for clients last year and where there is room for improvement. For me, New Year's resolutions are more about setting business goals and clearing the path for achievement, than starting a new fitness regiment.

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So, what's on your list of New Years resolutions? Improve sales? Grow your client base? Deliver more value? Very laudable pursuits, which can all be accomplished through improved communications. If you're anything like the average benefit professional, it would do wonders to give your communications efforts a little more attention. As a recent panelist for a seminar on communications for several dozen employee benefits executives, I was once again reminded how often effective communication falls down - or off - the list of priorities for benefit advisers, and product and service providers.

A survey conducted in conjunction with the seminar revealed some alarming trends.

When asked if they both had and enforced formal communication guidelines - generally accepted as a very basic component of a successful, professional communications program - just 20% of respondents said yes. The majority either said they had guidelines but did not enforce them (28%), or had no guidelines at all (52%).

Respondents also revealed they are largely reactive in the way they deal with communication and marketing opportunities, not generally considered the best approach. Just 17% said they create an annual plan and review it quarterly. And only 19% said they take the essential step of linking communications to business objectives and quarterly goals.

Benefit advisers and other benefit professionals, in general, would be well-served to make better communications a top priority for the New Year.

Thoughtful communication can help grow your brand, prove your value, shorten your length of sale and position you as a thought leader. All amazingly valuable things for your business. So, why does communication seem so daunting?

Maybe it was that high school English teacher who told you that you couldn't write. Or, maybe you're a "numbers guy." Regardless, communication is key to your business success and just because you didn't major in English doesn't mean you can't have an incredibly effective and thorough approach to it. You just have to start working on it.

Here's how I suggest the communication-deficient get started. Do these three things right away and your communications efforts will improve dramatically.

First, create a plan. Sounds simple enough, right? What are the major events and activities you need to focus on this year? What marketing efforts are you undertaking? What will help you get your message out to new clients and stay front-of-mind to current ones? Get all of your needs captured in a simple marketing plan for the year by identifying all of your communication events (one-off and ongoing) and the resources that will help execute against them. Your plan doesn't have to be complex or daunting but make sure you document your business goals and the month-by-month communication activities required to achieve them. A simple timeline or checklist will do wonders to keep you focused and on track.

Second, do a brand audit. Sounds fancy, but it's just an exercise designed to give you an idea of where you're at. Take every piece of communication you developed last year and spread them out on a table or stick them on the walls. Do they tell the same story or do they look like 12 different companies created them? Do they have a consistent and powerful voice or do they make you sound schizophrenic? Do you stand out from the competition or just look like one of the pack?

Third, build a style guide. A style guide lays down the rules for your company - how to use your logo, what colors and where, fonts, tone, photos, even acronyms. Spell them all out so that you can check things for consistency in look and content. Create templates that show the "right way" and make sure someone is able to check materials

before they go out the door.

When you start doing all of these things effectively and consistently, you'll be in a much better position to help your clients communicate, too.

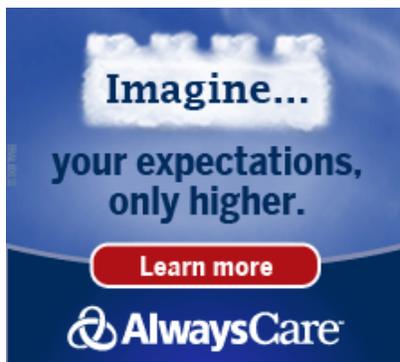
Better communications can do great things for you and your clients, but only if you give them the attention they deserve. Resolve to make communications a priority in '09 and watch what it does for your business.

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