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Are you talking to me?

To get employees' attention, how you communicate is just as critical as the message itself

By McLean Robbins

November 1, 2008

Most benefits communication experts agree; the four corners to effective employee communication are:

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1. Keep it simple - no jargon allowed.
2. Use a communication vehicle your employees understand.
3. Get the message out decisionmakers, who are sometimes people other than employees - like spouses.
4. Communicate on a year-round basis. One-hit wonders don't provide lasting impact.

Whether you're talking about 401(k)s or flu shots, these tips are a good starting point. But too often, it's not the "what" or the "who" that gets lost, but the "how."

Finding the best way to effectively reach diverse employee audiences is a challenge for employers of all sizes and across all industries - especially when employees seemingly turn a deaf ear. Two emerging trends, however, can help benefit managers break through the communication logjam: consumer marketing strategies and social media.

Be 'wicked cool'

Why do people like Macs? Aside from the cute guy in the commercials, many people talk up their "cool" features, like the light-up apple symbol or magnetic power cord. Does that make it any better than a high-end IBM? Not necessarily.

Experts say the same principle - the consumer marketing strategy of hooking employees with "cool" features - can easily apply to benefits communication.

"You've got to meet the wicked cool factor," says Elizabeth Byerly, office practice leader in communications for

Watson Wyatt's Atlanta office. For example, use a different voice or action for all communications (like the Geico commercials). Make a simple e-mail stand out with a popular song playing in the background, she suggests.

Upping an organization's cool factor also can involve leveraging cool employees, the pros assert. Think of them as employee-Fonzes.

"Find who the opinion shapers and vocal people are within your organization and get them involved," says Michal Kisilevitz, managing director of the Benefits Roundtable at Corporate Executive Board.

Kisilevitz suggests running major benefit changes and communications through a benefits advisory group of respected employees, preferably of varying ages and experience levels. They'll have a handle on whether or not it will effectively target employees and can then become spokespeople for new programs - an easy and cheap advertising tool.

Stephanie Gangi, manager of benefits communication and training for Reed Elsevier, says that her company established the "cool" factor by launching a re-branding effort.

New materials had an avant garde font, slick logo and short, catchy messaging. They were going for "consumer grade" level products, not just a new logo on the same old products.

Their newsletter, for example, was revamped to include more photos, shorter articles and increased use of color.

Kisilevitz suggests that the same employee newsletter with a slightly different title can easily be rebranded to communicate to a spouse.

"Employees are moving targets, so you need to add strategic marketing to more traditional tactic-based benefits communication," Gangi says.

Incorporate social media

The movement toward technology has been embraced by organizations of all sizes and industries in recent years, largely driven by the increase in popularity of social media tools like blogs and podcasts.

"The beauty of social media is that you don't have to be tech-savvy to use the tools," says Benz. "You can communicate in the ways your employees are expecting without having to wait for [the] IT departments to catch up."

Benz advocates blogs and podcasts because they foster a two-way conversation among employees and leadership, as well as allow employees to help themselves. Gangi concurs: "There's a certain degree of transparency in a blog that allows employees to help each other."

However, although such tools allow for more a more personal touch, Benz reminds employers to maintain professionalism when using such communication tools.

Carol Tavella, senior manager of compensation and benefits for SMART in Pennsylvania, says that blogs can be a great tool for companies with employees in alternate work environments. "They can be quickly reactive or even proactive in addressing issues as they arise."

She cautions that employers setting up blogs, particularly on third-party platforms, should be careful to keep access behind passwords or firewalls if confidential company information will be shared.

Print has its place

Despite a push toward the technical, print isn't dead. Even for the most tech-savvy workforce, home mailers still may be the best way to reach benefits decision-makers, like spouses.

A well-crafted book or selection of benefits materials is often still a good idea. The key is to ensure that hard-copy communications have a look and feel that echoes their importance, says Benz. Otherwise, your hard-earned booklets are simply a waste of trees, bound for the recycle bin after open enrollment.

Benz Communications recently was awarded the Profit Sharing/401(k) Council of America's lead award for benefits communication for their work with Inuit. Their wirebound benefits book was effective particularly because it had the look and feel of something an employee would want to keep and refer to, Benz says.

Can we talk?

When Harris Teeter, a 175-store, 20,000-employee grocery chain in the southeastern United States, was charged with revamping their existing benefit communications, benefits manager Kerri Simmons put into practice the principle that people learn best when they listen and participate at the same time.

In 2005-2006, Simmons says the company offered a great benefits package but was not engaging employees because many didn't understand their benefits. The paper-based system was a nightmare for HR/benefits staff, who keyed in as many as 6,500 different paper enrollment choices each year.

Simmons knew there was a better way - real-time tracking of employee issues, a streamlined enrollment process - and sought to engage employees at the same time. She hoped this strategy would control costs, streamline the HR function and increase voluntary benefit enrollment as well.

After extensive research, Simmons implemented a phone-based benefits enrollment function that would allow employees to call in on their own time to walk through benefit enrollments. Extensive mailings notified employees that enrollment for 2006 was mandatory even if they already were receiving company benefits. Every employee was given a paper enrollment booklet that led them, screen-by-screen, through their enrollment. Fill-in-the-blank style, a specially trained telephone coach would walk employees through benefit selection, stopping to offer cost comparisons, benefit explanations and even discuss plan options for each participant.

Over 95% of employees participated through call-ins during the first year, and the additional 5% were targeted through a "if you don't call us, we call you" backup plan.

In the first year, Harris Teeter saw a 39% enrollment in voluntary benefits and reduced turnover to 7%.

When asked what the biggest benefits were, Simmons had three simple words: "Cost savings. Huge." But the biggest benefit of all, she says, was the lack of "noise in January," as employees finally understood their benefits and fully began to engage in and appreciate the package Harris Teeter offered. "It's amazing how many employees didn't know we had a company life insurance policy," she says. "We were heroes after that."

7 habits of highly successful benefits communicators

Tim Stentiford, principal in Hewitt's communication practice, shares his seven tips for redefining benefits communication and really delivering results.

1. Start with a business case.

Understand what the problem or the opportunity is based on data.

2. Take a total-population view.

The greatest service is to kill the term employee communication because it doesn't apply to most employers. Make communication a family-friendly strategy.

3. Take a total-experience view.

Employees and families deal with many companies for benefits. No one owns the overall experience. Benefits communication needs to adopt a MapQuest, turn-by-turn mentality.

4. Take a consumer-marketing approach.

Typically, HR comes armed with the "who" and the "what." Borrow or learn from consumer marketing and research to introduce the concept of "why."

5. Repeat yourself.

It's so important, I'll say it twice.

6. Offer personal guidance.

It's not about telling people what to do. It's about showing them how to do what's best for them.

7. Apply a behavioral framework.

Once you understand the "why," start a call to action that encourages a response from employees.

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