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Benefit communications redesigned for diverse workforce

By JOANNE WOJCIK

Recognizing that the American workforce is becoming increasingly multilingual and multicultural, many employers and health plans have been redesigning their health benefit communications to reach this diverse population.

But merely translating brochures, Web sites and other materials into other languages is not enough, communication experts say, because, in addition to the language barriers, there often are cultural barriers that prevent employees from diverse backgrounds from seeking appropriate medical care.

To be effective, benefit communications must take these cultural differences into account and, in some cases, go beyond the traditional workplace model and extend into the homes and communities of the groups being targeted, benefit communication experts say.

"In the written and verbal communication, we spend much more time helping them understand the health care system in this country," which is different from that in most other countries, said Kirk Rothrock, president and chief executive officer of CompBenefits Corp., a dental and vision plan based in Atlanta.

Most people from other countries typically received their health care services in clinics, whereas in the United States, "we have a generalist and a specialist community in health care, dental and vision. They struggle with this. It's not enough to translate the materials to say 'Go to a generalist for this' or 'Go to a specialist for that,'" Mr. Rothrock said.

Furthermore, "this population is not focused on prevention," he added.

For example, "they only go to the den-

tist or optometrist as needed," even though virtually every dental insurance plan covers preventive care at 100%, Mr. Rothrock said.

To encourage prevention and, hopefully, reduce future dental costs, CompBenefits employs a significant number of bilingual call center employees who have been trained to steer the conversation toward preventive care and clearly explain available benefits, he said.

Roswell, Ga.-based HispaniCare has been building bilingual versions of health plan and third-party administrator-sponsored Web sites that not only are translated from English into Spanish but are specifically designed to address the special health needs of Hispanic plan members.

For example, because Hispanics are prone to diabetes, which is linked to diet and obesity, HispaniCare has developed an interactive weight management site specifically designed for Hispanics, said Dirk Schroeder, executive vp of HispaniCare.

HispaniCare is working with several large employers in Texas to test the effectiveness of the site and will present its findings at the June meeting of the National Business Group on Health's Institute on Obesity, he said.

"Health care is a unique field when it comes to communication," said Mr. Schroeder, who has spent 20 years researching cross-cultural and multicultural health care issues. "It's technical; people don't understand it, and they're scared."

And that is why people who are not native speakers of English may be more comfortable discussing their health care with others who speak their language and share their culture, he said.

"You may be fluent in French, but if you're in Paris and you've been diagnosed with breast cancer and your doctor is discussing with you whether or not to have a mastectomy, wouldn't you want to hear it in your native language?" he asked.

In acknowledgement, the Blue Foundation for a Healthy Florida, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Florida's philanthropic affiliate in Lakeland, recently awarded We Care of Polk County a grant to hire a part-time, bilingual outreach coordinator.

"It is difficult at times for us to communicate with our minority clients who do not speak English or do not speak it well," said Sandy Swanson, director of We Care of Polk County. "This grant will allow us to better serve our clients, providing a bilingual coordinator to follow up with patients and ensure they complete the necessary treatment plan."

Even when the language is understood, though, cultural nuances could also interfere with communication, according to Robert Oscar, president and founder of RxEOB, a Web-based communications vendor based in Richmond, Va. Earlier this month, RxEOB launched a Spanish-language version of its Web site under a partnership with Triple-S of Puerto Rico, a Blue Shield licensee.

"It's important to be sensitive. That's one reason we ask our clients to review the Web site to make sure we're not accidentally saying something inappropriate," Mr. Oscar said.

There is an assumption at some companies that, because their employees are required to speak English and have at least a high school education, there is no need to engage in any special communications in other languages.



Spanish versions of pages from the Christus Health and AtlantiCare Web sites are more than simply translations from the English-language pages. They are designed to address the needs of Hispanic plan members.

But even highly educated people who can speak conversational English may not be able to understand the abstract English used to describe health care symptoms, conditions and treatments, said Shani Dowd, director of clinical cultural competence training at the Institute for Linguistic & Cultural Skills at the Harvard Pilgrim Healthcare Foundation in Quincy, Mass.

"They may be quite fluent in both languages but may not be fluent in medical terminology," Ms. Dowd said.

Even in medical offices with bilingual staff, communication errors could occur, leading to noncompliance with certain treatments or, worse, to medical errors, she said.

"A lot of bilingual staff who are called upon to interpret may not have training in medical terminology or understanding why physicians ask questions the way they do," she explained.

The institute provides two levels of training for medical interpreters—a basic program and an advanced program for those who need disease-specific information, including translations for describing common treatments or tests that are used.

"There clearly is a growing awareness and interest in trying to provide more information and support in different languages," said Suzanne M. Kenney, a communications consultant at Hewitt

Associates Inc. in Lincolnshire, Ill.

In some cases, employers are using nontraditional benefit communication venues, she said.

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*Suzanne M. Kenney
Hewitt Associates inc.*

"For example, in some cultures, particularly if it's a first-generation immigrant to the United States, there may be a greater sense of confidence and trust and comfort with a local newspaper, or perhaps a particular person in the community who is considered an activist," she said.

In fact, Hewitt has been talking with some ethnic media organizations in California about running announcements on employers' health promotion efforts, she said.

The alternate venue has proved effective in the African-American community, according to Virgil Simons, founder and president of Prostate Net, a nonprofit health education company based in Guttenberg, N.J.

More than 10,000 men were screened for prostate cancer after they learned about the disease at their local barber-shops, which had been recruited by Prostate Net as part of a nationwide campaign that also included partnering with Los Angeles-based Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc. in the release of the 2004 film "Barbershop 2."

"Barbershops are places where men come to socialize, engage in dialogue, open and free communication. It's a country club, of sorts, where men can literally 'let their hair down,'" he said.

"There's also a historical paradigm related to African-American barber-shops," he said. "Going back to the civil rights movement, the planning and mobilization sessions took place in the barbershop, because it was considered a safe place to talk and share strategy."

Though Prostate Net's program is currently focused on prostate cancer screening, plans are to expand it to include other diseases endemic in the African-American male population, according to Mr. Simons.

"From a benefit manager's standpoint, it's important that they recognize that their traditional ways of communicating have to be expanded to include some kind of community partnerships to really get the messages out and get them acted upon and adopted by the communities," he said.