How to Use the Communication Materials

Learn how to use the Communication Materials most effectively. These tips are based on the actual experiences of other organizations.

Step 1: Identify your communication goals
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Step 1: Identify your communication goals

Each organization that uses the Employee Health Communication Toolkit has unique goals. Taking the time to plan your use of the materials can help ensure your success—and makes the best use of your organization’s resources.

This information can help you think through key issues.

What you need to know about your audience

The Communication Materials are designed so that you can adapt them as much or as little as needed for your audience. But, first, it helps to be clear on several things:

Who are you trying to reach?

Do you want to communicate with all of your employees or members, or are you targeting certain groups? Will you reach out only to employees or members, or to their families as well? Does your audience include other organizations—for example, unions?

What are the important characteristics of your audience?

What characteristics are relevant to their understanding and use of the information in the materials? Learn how characteristics of your audience can affect your communications.

How is your audience likely to respond?

How has your audience responded to previous efforts to convey information about their health, health care quality, or the use of evidence in health care? Realize that the topics addressed in the Communication Materials can be challenging for people. For example, previous research has found that many people:

- do not fully understand or agree with the concepts and goals of evidence-based health care
- regard evidence-based health care as unnecessary or irrelevant to them
- are suspicious of employers’ and health plans’ motives in communicating about evidence-based health care
- feel overwhelmed by what they think evidence-based health care demands of them.
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To learn more about these findings, go to:

- Evidence That Consumers Are Skeptical About Evidence-Based Health Care, Health Affairs, June 2010
- Communication Challenges: Communicating with Employees About Evidence-Based Health Care

What are the information needs of your audience?

What information does your audience already have? What information do they want? How does your audience prefer to get information from you (online, in hard copy, or by oral presentations)?

One of the best ways to learn your audience’s information needs is to ask them. Several organizations that used the Communication Materials conducted brief surveys or talked with their employees and members to find out what people wanted to know and how they wanted to receive it. Many organizations that thought they knew their audiences well were surprised by what they learned.

Download an Employee / Member Survey. Distribute this survey to your employees or members to better understand their information needs.

What you need to know to develop your goals

What are your organization’s goals for a communication campaign built around the Communication Toolkit? What specific actions do you want your audience to take, or what behavioral changes would you like to see? What do they need to do to make these changes?

To move towards these big-picture goals, start by answering the following questions.

How do the Communication Materials fit with your other communications and benefits strategies?

Consider how the Communication Materials relate to and can build on current or planned health care messaging with employees. For example, one major purchaser of health benefits regarded the Communication Materials as a way to reinforce existing communications about the importance of being an engaged health care consumer in a branded action plan called “Be Well and Well Informed.” To learn more about how the Communication Materials have been adapted, go to Users’ Stories.

What do you want your audience to know about their health and health care?

Your goals may be related to recent or upcoming changes in your benefits plan, programs you are trying to promote (such as support with disease management), or health issues that are prevalent in your audience. Think about what your audience knows now and what misconceptions you need to address.

What can you do to support your audience?

It’s difficult for people to make changes in their behavior, particularly when you are asking them to do hard and unfamiliar things. Consider ways you can encourage and support changes. Possibilities include providing links to reliable, trustworthy health information or holding seminars to walk people through comparative quality information on local providers.
What has been your experience with different communication formats and channels?

Because the concepts and information in the Communication Materials may be new to your audience, using effective, trusted media and communication formats and channels is particularly important.

What challenges can you anticipate?

What are the barriers to the changes in knowledge or behavior you want to see? How do you expect your messages to be perceived by your audience? For example, one health plan that used the Toolkit recognized that getting beyond the skepticism of its members was a critical component of their communication strategy.

What can you do to facilitate changes in knowledge and behavior?

Consider how you can have an impact on barriers by creating incentives (for example, financial incentives such as eliminating co-payments for primary care visits and increasing them for certain ER visits).

What results do you anticipate?

If people make the changes you ask for, what do you hope will happen? What are the expected benefits to your employees or members? What are the expected benefits to your organization? Be clear about anticipated outcomes and benefits to establish trust with your audience. Outlining your anticipated results also helps you set incremental goals to track progress and assess whether you are moving in the right direction.
Step 2: Select and customize the Communication Materials

This information helps you decide which Communication Materials to use. It also has tips on adapting the materials and getting feedback from your audience.

Decide which materials to use

The Communication Materials are organized into five topic areas. You can use all of the materials—or select the ones that best address your communication goals.

To select the materials you are going to use, review them and consider:

- How do the materials support your communication goals?
- How do the materials support what you want your audience to know and do?
- Which messages in the Communication Materials are likely to be most helpful?
- How do the materials fit with other information you’re currently communicating to your employees or members (e.g., about benefit design, health care quality, or being an informed health care consumer)?

To learn about how other organizations have used the Communication Materials, go to Users’ Stories.

Advice from users of the Toolkit includes the following:

Start small.

If you have multiple communication goals, choose one or two to focus on initially. An incremental approach allows you to focus your communications, assess the process and results, and identify ways to build on and improve your efforts. It also prevents your audience from being overwhelmed with too much information at one time.

Begin with the materials in Topic 1 (Tips for your health care appointment) and Topic 2 (Using the internet to find health information).

These materials meet common needs and are easy for your audience to understand. They help pave the way for later communications on more difficult topics, such as understanding health care costs or getting the right amount of health care. This is particularly important if your organization is new to communicating with employees and members about health care quality or evidence-based health care.

Revisit your goals often.

From time to time throughout your campaign, revisit your goals and the Communication Materials to think about how you can build on and reinforce the messages and information you’ve provided.
Customize the materials

The Communication Materials are designed so that you can customize them as much or as little as you’d like.

Option 1: Use the materials as-is

If you would like to use the materials without modifying the main content or design:

1. **Delete or customize the yellow highlighted sections.**
   Make any edits in the Microsoft® Word versions of the documents. To compare the formatting of your document to the original, download the PDF version. Be sure to test and update links to website addresses (URLs).

2. **Replace the sample photographs.**
   The materials in Topics 1 - 4 contain sample photos from a low-cost stock photo company. For legal reasons, you must pay for the sample photos if you would like to use them. Find out how to order the sample photos. The materials in Topic 5 include illustrations developed and owned by American Institutes for Research (AIR); you are free to use these illustrations in any adaptations of these materials.

If you choose not to use the sample photos or illustrations, add your own photos or graphics to personalize the documents and add visual appeal. When selecting photos or graphics, follow these guidelines:

- Photographs and graphics should be clear, simple, and uncluttered.
- People in the photographs should reflect the diversity of your population.
- Photographs and graphics should include poses, body language, and facial expressions that are appropriate to the message and situation they illustrate.

3. **Acknowledge the source of the materials.**
   Add the following statement: “These materials were adapted from the Communication Toolkit that was developed by American Institutes for Research with funding from the California HealthCare Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.”

Option 2: Adapt the materials

Organizations can adapt the Communication Materials by customizing the content or design. Many organizations that have used the Toolkit adapted the materials to suit their organization’s voice and audience’s needs. For example:

- One large purchaser condensed the Communication Materials into a set of one-page tips, each of which had two sections: “What You Should Know” and “What You Can Do.”
- A public employer created a series of 15 one-page “tip” and “question” sheets. The tip sheets were a short summary of key points from four of the topic areas covered in the Communication Materials. The question sheets contained questions to ask in various situations, such as choosing a health care provider, deciding on a medical treatment, and using a prescription.
- Another employer incorporated elements of the Communication Materials into condition-specific communications (e.g., diabetes).

To learn more about how the Communication Materials have been adapted, go to [Users’ Stories](#).
Guidelines for adapting the materials

The Communication Materials have been tested extensively to ensure that people can understand and use them. Although you are free to adapt the materials in whatever way you like, it’s important that your adapted materials reflect the key development and design principles of the Communication Materials. This helps ensure your materials are understandable, well received, and effective.

Use the [Design and Development Checklist](#) to assess whether your materials follow the principles underlying the Communication Materials.

The checklist items are organized around these questions:

- Do the materials clearly state what your organization is doing to support employees or members in working toward a common goal?
- Are the key messages clear?
- Are the materials action-oriented with specific, concrete action items?
- Do the materials include examples to make them personally relevant to employees or members?
- Do the materials explain difficult or unfamiliar concepts in ways that are easy to understand?
- Is the formatting simple, approachable, and easy to skim?

Get feedback on your materials

A small amount of time spent getting simple feedback from your audience on the front end offers several benefits:

- Learn what works well and what you need to improve to communicate more effectively.
- Attract your audience’s interest and let them know you care about their perspective—which helps build trust.
- Help your audience feel more invested in the outcome.

Gathering feedback often saves you time and money in the long run and makes your communication efforts more effective.

Learn more about how to get feedback on your materials.

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**Webinar About Developing and Testing Materials for Employees**

[View the webinar](#)  
[Download the slides](#)

This webinar explains how to use individual interviews to gather feedback from employees and members to develop communication materials. You will learn how this kind of testing can answer critical questions about your messages and materials:

- Do your messages and materials address topics that are important to employees or members?
- Do employees or members interpret them as intended?
Step 3: Distribute the Communication Materials

This information helps you think through the following issues:

- When is the best time to distribute materials?
- What communication format or formats will you use?
- How will you publicize your communication campaign?
- How will you reinforce your message?

Develop your timeline

To develop your timeline, ask:

Is there a specific event or certain time of the year around which you want to plan your communications?

Employees of one organization that used the Toolkit expressed interest in receiving information about health care quality during open enrollment. Other organizations planned campaigns during “slow times” of the year to increase the focus on the campaign. Another idea is to include information about choosing quality health care in orientation packets for new employees or members.

Try to avoid overwhelming your audience with too much information at one time. You may want to stagger the distribution of materials or plan ways to build on your communications over time. This also allows you to reinforce key messages and remind employees or members about the resources you have provided.

How long will it take to plan and implement the campaign?

Work backwards from your launch date to determine about how long it will take you to plan and implement your communication campaign. Allow time for things like internal review of your communication plan and materials.

Also consider your organization’s capacities. For example, some organizations have found that launching a communication campaign during open enrollment can be challenging due to competing demands on staff time. If you do plan to distribute materials during open enrollment, allow plenty of lead time to plan your campaign.

Choose your communication format(s)

The materials you distribute should be easy for your audience to find and use at the time they are likely to need them. When selecting your communication format (or formats), think about how your audience prefers to get information. Also ask:

Which communication formats allow you to reach the most people?

If you have the resources, using a variety of communication formats can help you reach more people. Think about when and how your intended audience can access the materials. For some organizations, putting materials on a company website provides convenient access. For others, having the materials on an internal website means that employees can only access materials from work, not when they are at home.
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Which formats are most likely to be useful?

Consider how and when you want people to use the materials you are providing. For example, if you are using materials from Topic 1 (Tips for your health care appointment), it may be useful to provide hard copies of the materials and encourage people to take the materials with them when they visit the doctor.

Appropriate communication format(s) might include:

- Develop electronic versions of the materials and post them on your organization’s website or distribute them by email.
- Develop hard copy materials and mail them to people’s homes or distribute them during company meetings, health fairs, or other gatherings.
- Develop an oral presentation to give in person, or to record and make available as a webinar. (See the box below for a sample presentation with handouts for employees.)
- Incorporate information from the Communication Materials into newsletter articles.
- Incorporate information from the Communication Materials into short emails and send an email on a different topic each week.
- Create a series of short “information tips” to send by text message or social media (e.g., Twitter or Facebook).

Sample documents for a kick-off campaign

Educating Employees to Make Smart Decisions

Below are examples of a PowerPoint presentation with accompanying handouts that employers can use as part of a kick-off campaign to begin a conversation with their employees about the issues addressed in the Communication Materials. Employers are free to adapt these materials to meet their goals and needs.

- **Getting Smarter about Health Care – TOGETHER** (PowerPoint presentation)
- **Why is Our Company Talking About Getting Smarter About Health Care…and Why Should I Care?** Frequently Asked Employee Questions and Answers? (Word®)
- **Getting Smarter About Health Care: Three Steps You Can Take**– Employee Tip Sheet (Word®)

Publicize your communication efforts

Simply making materials available is not enough. You also need to let your employees or members know the materials are available and encourage their use.

Organizations that actively work to drive people to their materials experience far greater success. You could publicize your communication campaign through

- Newsletter articles
- Email
- Employee fairs
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- Lunch-and-learns or other group presentations
- Messages from company leadership
- Personal communications from employee champions or supervisors
- Social media (blogs, Facebook, Twitter)
- Message boards

If possible, use a variety of channels to spread the word about your communication campaign. One large health care purchaser promoted their campaign using newsletter articles, posters, a conference session, and social media.

When publicizing the materials, make sure you let employees or members know:
- What the materials are and where to find them
- Why you are distributing them
- Why and how you hope employees or members will use them

Reinforce the message

For many people, using evidence-based health care requires thinking about their health and health care in a new way. It means assuming more personal responsibility and developing new skills, such as speaking up and asking questions of their health care providers or seeking health information on their own. People often have concerns about these new responsibilities and behaviors—perhaps making it hard to act on the information they get.

To address this reluctance, it is especially important to seek out ways to reinforce and build on the messages and information you provide.

- **Look for opportunities to work with health plans and/or health care providers, including pharmacies and nurse help lines, to promote and support the messages you are communicating about using evidence.** You may also want to coordinate your efforts with those of other organizations—health departments, unions, business coalitions, advocacy groups, and community-based organizations. For example, one health plan coordinated its efforts with a health care purchaser to ensure that employees would get consistent messages from both organizations.

- **Build on external events to demonstrate the relevance of the Toolkit’s messages.** For example, if the local media report on the publication of quality comparisons for local hospitals, use the Communication Materials about health care quality standards and comparisons to help employees or members learn more.

- **Consider how your organization’s benefits strategy supports or undermines your messages and what you can do reinforce the messages and drive changes in behavior.** One employer coupled its communication campaign with efforts to improve access to health care by offering incentives to encourage appropriate care and use of resources.
Step 4: Evaluate your efforts

Evaluation—an often overlooked but valuable step—doesn’t need to be a formal or expensive process. Any information you collect helps show what you’ve accomplished and how you can improve future efforts. Planning ahead will help ensure that you build in time and resources for evaluation. This page can guide your evaluation process.

Track the number of materials distributed.

One of the easiest things to do is track dissemination of your materials. Keep count of how many hard copy materials you distribute. If you post materials online, track how many hits your website gets or how many times the documents are downloaded.

Learn about reactions to the materials.

Getting feedback after you distribute the materials can help you learn what people liked, what they didn’t, and what you can improve in the future. You can get this feedback by talking with groups of employees or members or by asking for written comments. If you post your materials online, you may want to include a link to a short feedback survey on the materials.

If you post your materials online, you may want to include a link to a short feedback survey on the materials. Download a sample feedback survey.

Assess changes in attitudes or knowledge.

If this interests you, one option is to survey employees or members prior to distributing the materials to ask about their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. Then, re-survey after distributing the materials to assess any changes.

Another option is to talk with groups of employees or members before and after you disseminate the materials. For example, to assess a campaign around “knowing your numbers,” one employer that used the Toolkit held focus groups to detect specific changes in employees’ knowledge of their personal health data.

Download a list of sample questions to help you get feedback after you distribute the materials.

Assess changes in behavior.

Because behavior changes slowly, measuring changes is a long-term process. Don’t be disappointed if you don’t see results overnight. The greatest potential for behavior change is when you provide information coupled with incentives to use and act on the information—for instance, providing materials that emphasize the value of preventive care and, at the same time, restructuring benefits to support the use of preventive health services.

To assess behavior change, you may want to gather claims data on utilization of health care services both before and after you distribute the materials. Look to see whether there are changes in how people access services (for example, emergency room use versus primary care), or whether there are differences in the number or types of claims you are receiving.

One employer that used the Toolkit assessed changes in behavior by looking at medical and pharmacy claims related to primary care and preventive visits, medication compliance, emergency room visits for non-emergency issues, and use of prenatal care. Another employer focused on employees’ participation in health risk assessments and use of wellness resources.
Appendix

How characteristics of your audience can affect your communications:
http://www.helpyouremployeeshealth.com/how-to-use-the-materials/how-audience-characteristics-can-affect-communications


Sample feedback survey on materials: http://www.helpyouremployeeshealth.com/files/Feedback_Survey.docx

Sample questions to gather feedback on your materials:
http://www.helpyouremployeeshealth.com/files/Questions to gather feedback on your materials.docx