Hospitals and Healthcare Systems

Communicate Your Way to an Improved Bottom Line
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Communicate Your Way to an Improved Bottom Line**  
[pages 3-4]

- No longer considered a soft expense 3
- It takes a paradigm shift 3
- Return on investment 4
- Communications related to health and wellness 4
- The changing face of employee communication 4

**Evolving Forms of Communication**  
[page 5]

- The audience and message take precedence 5
- No replacement for face-to-face 5

**A Quick Guide to Using Social Media**  
[pages 6-8]

- Blogs 6
- Intranet 6
- Message boards 7
- Wiki 7
- Podcasts and vidcasts 7
- Twitter 7
- Facebook 8

**Successful Communication Campaigns**  
[pages 8-9]

- Hospital ups employee satisfaction 33 percent 8
- Communicating health benefits 9
- Plenty of room for improvement 9

**Your Communications Plan**  
[pages 9-10]

- Learn the basic principles 9
- Perform a communications audit 10
- Tie the communications plan to the strategic plan 10
- Always match the methods to the audience 10

**A Living Document**  
[page 10]

**About Meritain Health**  
[page 11]

- Top hospital health plan administrator 11

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Communicate your way to an improved bottom line

Companies today are grappling with the challenge of how to communicate more frequently and more efficiently, even while tightening their budget belts. One specific challenge is how to integrate emerging technologies to improve the communication experience and maximize benefits.

For hospitals and healthcare systems, this challenge is magnified by their unique operations, the makeup of their employee populations and the rigorous requirements of providing quality patient care. During an uncertain economy, hospitals and health systems must strive to do more with tighter budgets and pared down staffing.

Hospitals operate in a fast-paced environment in which emergencies are common and the focus must always be on critical tasks at hand. They require around-the-clock staffing in multi-location facilities by personnel with diverse professional and educational backgrounds and widely varying skill sets and job responsibilities. Hospital personnel tend to be multi-national with different cultural influences and language barriers. Moreover, each day brings medical advancements that produce more efficacious patient care and better outcomes while, at the same time, heightening the need for effective communication.

In view of these factors, hospitals must be at the forefront of the progressive movement toward blending new and traditional modes of communication to deliver crucial messages. Perhaps the most pressing communication requirement is helping employees understand their roles in achieving organizational goals and objectives. Effective communication “can uncover opportunities and help anticipate problems. And it can certainly help bring about change.” 1

No longer considered a soft expense

Because employee communication has traditionally been considered a soft expense, with no direct way to measure its value, it is often one of the first casualties of corporate budget cuts. When a hospital scales back employee communication programs, it feeds employee speculation about the hospital’s financial situation and their own job security. Employees may perceive that they’re being devalued, causing morale to plummet.

Consider this: In a survey performed by Mercer Human Resource Consulting, employees were questioned about whether their organizations were doing a good job of keeping them informed about matters that affected them. “Of the employees who said yes, only 15 percent were thinking of leaving their job, while among those who said their employers do not keep them informed, 41 percent thought they might quit.” 2 Obviously, this is not the kind of message hospital management wants to send.

Increased Communication Improves Employee Satisfaction

It takes a paradigm shift

What hospitals need today is a paradigm shift, toward developing a long-term employee communications strategy based on transparency and the frequency and accessibility of messages. This requires managerial commitment to keep employees informed regarding the hospital’s situation, goals, objectives and strategies to get there. In choosing to openly communicate, a hospital can make employees feel that they are important contributors to the hospital’s success and inspire them to work harder and more effectively. Thinking differently about employee communications, and implementing new methods of sharing messages makes financial sense now and can set a hospital up for a stronger corporate culture down the line.

As noted by Employee Benefit News: “While conventional wisdom might dictate that scaling back is the only option [in a struggling economy], forward-thinking organizations recognize that they also need a strategy to respond to the needs of an over-extended workforce and retain key talent so they can maintain their competitive edge and be ready when the economy rebounds.” 3
Return on investment
While advantages related to employee engagement and morale are important, they are not the only returns a hospital may expect from its investment in employee communications. Reports of financial returns are beginning to funnel in. For instance, a recent study by Watson Wyatt reported that “a significant improvement in communication effectiveness is associated with a 29.5 percent increase in market value.”

And from Buzzle.com: “Techniques for good corporate communication have a number of tangible and intangible benefits including optimized increased revenue, improved customer retention and service and lead examples of corporate leadership to colleagues and new recruits.”

Communications related to health and wellness
The areas of employee health and wellness serve as on-point examples of how employee communications can help hospitals control costs. When hospitals use effective communication vehicles to ensure that employees understand the cost of healthcare, employees will consider costs when making healthcare decisions. Hospitals that sponsor employee wellness programs produce healthier workforces, further driving down healthcare costs. And hospitals that help employees understand their health benefits will move employees toward lifestyles that incorporate preventive care and medical check-ups to detect risk factors and take steps to prevent the onset of serious diseases.

Creating a communication plan that emphasizes timely and frequent messages can help to keep employees engaged and motivated. It’s important for companies to look beyond the traditional open enrollment period for communications and to see opportunities to promote the development of healthy lifestyles and proper health plan utilization throughout the year. This may include quarterly flyers on seasonal health issues, plan reminders such as FSA grace periods and full-time student documentation. These types of messages can be quickly distributed at little or no cost with the support of the right health benefits partner, and by taking advantage of emerging and existing technologies. While companies may prefer to distribute their formal plan documents in print, many take advantage of electronic vehicles to “keep-in-touch” with their populations.

Between ever-changing technology and a society that has accepted online interactions to be almost as real as face-to-face interaction, employers have adopted entirely new ways of bringing employees and resources together. Today, online communications is about forming connections, creating and implementing plans, and putting things into action in ways that were previously unimaginable.

The changing face of employee communication
At a time when the case for employee communication is becoming clearer, hospitals need to transcend traditional forms of communication to get their message out. This entails utilizing the power of new technology—blogs, wiki, message boards, Internet, intranet, podcasts, Blackberries, Facebook and Twitter (available on mobile devices)—and developing an understanding of the situations and audiences for which these forms of communication are appropriate.
It also requires an awareness of sources of information outside the employer's control. "In the new, relationship-based paradigm, employees 'ping' sources both inside and outside their organization for information. These sources include messages from a CEO, a direct supervisor, a company ad in the newspaper, a neighbor's comment about the company, a union steward's opinion, a stock analyst's report, or publicity around a corporate sponsorship." With this in mind, it is clear that a hospital must be part of the far-reaching, continual dialogue that brings the intended message to the forefront, where it captures employees' attention. Otherwise, the hospital's message will be drowned out amid the noise from other sources.

Evolving forms of communication

New forms of communication—or “social media”—are evolving ever so rapidly, it is hard to keep up. It is essential, however, for hospital communication specialists to understand the technology and its potential to make communication more effective and less costly. Using new technologies is ideal for creating an environment to share information better and extremely quickly.

The audience and message take precedence

Whatever forms of communication a hospital employs, it is important to remember that it is the audience and the message—not the communications vehicle—that take precedence when determining whether traditional or new forms of communication should be used in any given situation and with any audience. Hospital communicators should think about building communications strategies that layer methods in a way that reaches all of their employees and reinforces their messages.

The effectiveness of new communication technology requires that the audience have computer access and be comfortable using computers to receive and send messages and retrieve information. Many Americans use technology just as much outside of the workplace as in it. People comfortable with using cell phones, or those with basic home computing skills, can easily access and adapt more easily to new social media technologies, as most function in a way that mirrors Internet functions. With such audiences, blogs, podcasts, intranets, wiki, online message boards and other new technologies are appropriate.

However, many hospitals have employees with varying levels of knowledge and comfort with technology, as well as different education and skill sets. In such cases, traditional forms of communication—newsletters, posters, flyers, manuals and written correspondence, for instance—may be most effective. And in cases of mixed audiences, blended layers of new and traditional communication vehicles should be considered.

No replacement for face-to-face

Even as hospitals implement new communication vehicles, there is no replacement for face-to-face communication between managers and employees. Whether it is a personal one-on-one discussion, a team strategy session, or a hospital-wide meeting, face-to-face communication is often the best, most effective buy for a hospital's communications dollars.

"Done properly, managerial communication is as much about listening as it is about talking. It's discovering what questions and concerns employees have and providing responses that put information into proper perspective for the individual or work unit. It's taking big-picture issues and discussing how they affect the immediate work group and individual employees. It means engaging in a dialogue with employees to make sure that there's common understanding. It's why employees continue to rate their managers as extremely important and credible parts of their complete information mix."  

"A CEO of a large healthcare company once said he chooses his meeting venue this way: 'I like small groups for listening; I like large groups for maximum impact and clarity of message; and I like one-on-one because you bring out the best in people and are really cultivating their loyalty.'"  

-Buzzle.com, “Techniques for Effective Corporate Communication.”

"Corporate communication today is the result of phenomenal progress in the electronic technology. Gadgetry, such as the mobile phone and the Internet connectivity have harnessed the boon of electronic communication for the employer as well as the employee.”  

If it is not possible for managers to sit down on a regular basis with each employee or group of employees, a company can replicate the experience online or through personal communications such as podcasts and vidcasts.

More ways to reach employees than ever before

Reinforcing key messages is very important, as is reaching out to employees using vehicles that they’re comfortable with, and at a frequency consistent with your and their preferred social communication styles, regardless of age, gender, background, etc. As technology advances, employers are continuously presented with new and inventive ways to communicate with their employees, including:

- Blogs
- Intranet
- Message boards
- Wiki
- Podcasts and vidcasts
- Twitter
- Facebook

A quick guide to using social media

Blogs
Blogs (combining the terms “Web” and “logs”) are online journals used by groups of Internet-savvy people to share information and opinions. Blogs allow for posting comments and new information, making them tools for ongoing discussion. However, because the information in blogs is available to the general public, this is not the place to share confidential or private information.

Hospitals can use blogs to:

- Put a human face on a company.
- Build community and showcase a company’s culture.
- Easily share information among large numbers of people.
- Develop cohesion among staff members in decentralized organizations.

- Increase efficiency of communications for those with Web access.

Intranet
An intranet is a private network that looks and feels like an encapsulated version of the Internet. It is sponsored by an organization, and its main purpose is to share information among employees. An intranet can also be used to facilitate working in groups and for teleconferences.

According to Ehow.com, “the primary benefit of an intranet is that it allows the employees of a business to instantly access materials that would normally have to be printed out hundreds of times such as training materials, policy manuals or human resources updates. It can also be used as a means for employees to communicate with the company’s upper management so that there is a free exchange of ideas and comments.”

Intranet Advantages and Benefits

“The benefits of establishing an intranet are clear. It instantly cuts costs. Run off 20 copies of a 50-page employee handbook, add in the labor costs, and you’ve spent $50 or more. Just photocopying a one-page phone list and walking it around to every desk in the building can get expensive, especially when there’s an update every month—maybe even every week.

“The bigger benefits may be that distribution is immediate via an intranet and, better still, documents are always there for employees to consult whenever they need...Picture one common use: a vacation-planning calendar that lets employees put in dibs on specific weeks; and, while doing that, they can eyeball a shared calendar that tells them at a glance who’ll be in and who’ll be out during crucial times.”

It is important that intranets be interactive, that they use multiple forms of media for education and training and that content follows the rules of writing for the Internet.

**Message boards**

Online message boards work somewhat like bulletin boards in hospital facilities. Messages can be posted electronically by hospital management and employees about important topics.

“Because a message board is a venue for employees to openly learn about current issues and opinions of other employees, their usefulness as a reputation-builder within the company is immense. Some companies use message boards as a static mechanism for two-way feedback and dialogue, while others have used them during mergers to dispel merger-related issues.”

**Wiki**

A wiki is a dynamic Web site in which any user can add pages, modify content and comment on existing content. In the past, wikis have been used almost exclusively by software developers and other small groups of employees collaborating on a specific project. Wikis, unlike blogs, are interactive and allow users to make changes and add content to existing comments.

Due to their dynamic nature, wiki-based sites are not appropriate for broad communication with different audiences. However, they can be advantageous for exchanging information within teams and groups. For example, a hospital’s human resource or benefits administration staff could use a wiki to share ideas, ask questions or discuss sensitive matters.

**Podcasts and vidcasts**

According to the online dictionary AllWords.com, a podcast is “a digital recording of a broadcast made available on the Internet for downloading to personal audio or video players. The word originally derived from a combination of ‘broadcasting’ and ‘iPod’; ” however, it is not necessary to use an iPod to access a podcast.

Vidcasts, or video recordings that are posted online, are an excellent option for hospitals to personalize their messages. Hospitals with multiple locations can take advantage of video to deliver executive or other important messages.

Both podcasts and vidcasts can be used to:

- Introduce and update employees on new products and services.
- Communicate information about a hospital’s challenges.
- Keep employees current regarding mergers, acquisitions and other significant corporate transactions.
- Train employees to use new equipment.
- Inform employees regarding benefits.
- Announce new policies and procedures.

From a health benefits perspective, podcasts and vidcasts can be used to:

- Introduce new health benefits.
- Deliver wellness messages.
- Position a change in benefits.

**Provide real-time updates to your employees using Twitter**

Twitter is a free social networking and micro-blogging service that allows users to communicate back and forth with up-to-the-minute information.

**Twitter**

Using Twitter, a hospital can achieve many of the same objectives as Facebook, only in a more abbreviated format. Twitter can be used to add an additional layer to employee communications to emphasize messages. It is an ideal vehicle for:

- Sending brief health messages and reminders.
- Sending links to health resources such as health blogs.

Twitter also enables a hospital to stream messages to business or personal mobile devices.
Facebook
If investment in an intranet is not possible, an employer can share information by creating a no-cost online environment using Facebook. Depending on its communications objectives, a hospital can create either a public or private Facebook group. A public group allows the hospital to share information with both employees and the outside community. A private group is accessible only to employees, so it can be used to communicate personal and confidential information.

Facebook is an ideal vehicle for:

- Promoting employee benefit offerings, particularly if the hospital has an interesting or generous benefit structure that might attract new employees.
- Publicizing health-focused events in which the hospital is participating or hosting. Examples include walks or runs, on-site health fairs, and other employee or family-friendly events.
- Sharing information about employee participation in charitable or cultural activities in the community.
- Updating employees regarding important corporate news.

Facebook has the added advantage of having messages stream to business or personal mobile devices.

Successful communication campaigns

Following are examples of how a hospital can use employee communication to achieve strategic objectives.

Hospital ups employee satisfaction 33%
Following its implementation of a new employee communication method, George Washington University Hospital (GWUH) performed an internal survey. The survey results were remarkable: employee satisfaction with hospital communication increased by 33 percent. In addition, the new method improved patient and family satisfaction.

“The increase is a result of communication with hospital staff, visitors and patients via a mixture of interactive PC screensavers and Digital Signage presentations.”

“The new communication method...allows GWUH to inform and motivate staff, update visitors and patients and warn all with one single system. The messages are targeted to the audience or monitor location: the latest hospital and healthcare news is broadcasted on all 1,200 personal computer (PC) work stations as an interactive screensaver and on large monitors in the staff elevator bays. Targeted messages are also published on big screens in the visitor elevator bays, main lobby, and physician lounges.”

Majority of Employees Do Not Understand Benefits

The MetLife 2004 Employee Benefits Trend Study found that 60 percent of full-time employees don’t understand which benefits best meet their needs. That jumps to 71 percent for those ages 21–30. A good communication program can promote understanding, which will result in better healthcare decisions.

Employee Understanding of Benefits, All Full-Time Employees

- 40% Employees who don’t understand benefits

Employee Understanding of Benefits, Ages 21-30

- 29% Employees who don’t understand benefits

"Broadcasts on staff PCs and on the large screens in restricted areas includes internal hospital news, urgent news such as IT upgrades expected to disrupt the workflow, news on drug issues from suppliers, and a few more healthcare news items automatically imported from an online news site."

**Communicating health benefits**
The results of a recent survey performed by MetLife should be a wake-up call for every human resource specialist. The survey revealed that the majority of employees do not understand their benefits.

This should come as no surprise. “Benefits change often and can be difficult to understand. The terminology is unique: copayment, coinsurance, out-of-pocket limit, formulary, etc. The rules are complicated and strict. You can’t use the features wisely if you don’t understand the instructions.”

Unlike some other business areas, health benefits is a year-round function that “takes a well-planned, communication strategy for an organization to elevate its employees’ understanding of their health benefits, as well as increasing participation [in a] wellness program and creating smart consumers of healthcare services.”

For these reasons, it is essential that employee benefits staff utilize multiple vehicles throughout the year. “Creating a year round communications plan offers…the opportunity to use multiple formats that can reinforce one another. We live in an age of information overload, so it’s critical to make use of a variety of strategies to ensure that your message reaches its intended audience.”

**Plenty of room for improvement**
As new forms of communication emerge, the shift is not complete or without disadvantages.

For instance:
- Communicators are relatively unfamiliar with newer tools such as blogs, but see their potential.
- Blogging by senior management is still quite uncommon.
- Intranet message boards are rare, but when they exist, they are frequently monitored by corporate gatekeepers.

- Employees without computer access are increasingly losing their “voice” in an environment that relies more and more on electronic forms of communication.
- The use of instant messaging at the workplace is on the rise, yet few companies have formal policies to monitor it.

**Your communications plan**

**Learn the basic principles**
The basic principles of employee communication are valid across a broad span of industries, including hospitals and health systems. These principles should be incorporated into a hospital’s communications plan and used as a touch point—that is, a way to measure and routinely evaluate the hospital’s ongoing message delivery.

Here are some tips:
- Employee communication must be two-way: from hospital management to employees and from employees to management.
- To support two-way communication, large hospitals require a management-level communications specialist who is part of the strategic planning process.
- Management must actively demonstrate the importance it places on communicating with employees by soliciting and responding to employee input, questions and concerns.
- To participate in achieving the hospital’s goals and objectives, employees must know what they are. Providing them with copies of the hospital’s strategic plan will help them understand how their jobs connect with the overall direction of the hospital.
- Employee communication includes manuals. Provide employees with a manual outlining the hospital’s policies and an operating manual describing routine practices and procedures. Manuals can be made available both online and in hard copy, depending on the audience.
Job descriptions and performance evaluations are important communication vehicles. All employees should have job descriptions that serve as the basis for evaluating performance, and performance reviews should be an annual priority. Failing to perform annual reviews will communicate indifference on the part of management.

Hospitals should routinely hold staff meetings, and supervisors should frequently conduct team meetings and one-on-one discussions.

Hospitals should celebrate employee achievements. It will inspire employees and boost morale.

Hospital management must make it a priority to keep employees informed during times of change or crisis. It will prevent them from forming their own conclusions, which frequently are based on limited information or personal perspectives.

Perform a communications audit
A useful first step in designing an employee communications plan is performing a communications audit to identify:

- The messages management wants to convey.
- The messages employees are actually receiving.
- The current vehicles through which messages are being communicated.

The audit will reveal the effectiveness of the hospital’s current communications and areas in which there is a disconnect between what management wants employees to know and what employees believe to be true. In evaluating instances of disconnect, a hospital should determine why the message is being short circuited and correct the problem.

Tie the communications plan to the strategic plan
It is important to tie the hospital’s employee communications plan to its strategic plan because the strategic plan outlines the hospital’s goals and objectives. The communications plan should support the achievement of these goals and objectives. In this way, management can encourage employees to become engaged in helping the hospital to succeed.

In addition, linking the communications plan to the hospital’s strategic plan “will ensure that the good intentions to communicate with employees actually happens.”

Evaluating Communications
The following questions will help when evaluating the effectiveness of communications.

- Are they regular and timely?
- Are they clear, concise and credible?
- Is there balance?
- Are you using multiple channels?
- Are you consistent?
- Is your message put in context?

Always match the methods to the audience
As described throughout this paper, methods of communication are evolving, with new gadgetry continually coming to market. But not every method works with every audience. Before choosing communication vehicles or drafting messages, the make-up of the audience should always be considered.

A living document
Like a business plan, an employee communications plan is never finished. When it is tied to a hospital’s strategic plan, it becomes a living document that evolves with the hospital. Management should be sure to evaluate the plan periodically to determine its ongoing effectiveness and implement special communication strategies during times of change or crisis. The return on the hospital’s investment will be employees who are engaged, enthused and motivated with a bottom line that reflects a positive return on investment.
About Meritain Health

Meritain Health, an independent subsidiary of Aetna, is one of the nation’s largest administrators of health benefits. We offer the resources of a national carrier and the unmatched flexibility and service of an independent, local administrator. Our approach provides employers with cost-effective plan administration within a custom framework of variable networks, industry-leading products and services, and cost management strategies.

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