

September 28, 2006

Best practices in communicating benefits

HR departments could do a lot better with their benefit communications, according to **Dennis Ackley**, an employee communication consultant and president of Missouri-based Ackley Associates.

He recommends using examples and anecdotes. "Adults are moved a lot by stories about what other people are doing," he says. "Trust is everything in communication."

If your business encourages health care consumerism, it should offer tips on that topic. If you don't help them, "it just breeds cynicism" about the company and the benefits, Ackley comments. "Teach employees what good consumers do because they don't know."

Common mistakes include using too much insurance jargon, allowing employee decision-making on plan design and sending out advertising-style teasers too far in advance. Don't provide messages that are too vague or incomplete. "The grapevine will eat you alive" if you communicate benefits "in bits and pieces," Ackley notes.

Additionally, tell workers what the health plan is worth to them. "It's a reward. It's a benefit. Let's start talking like it is," Ackley remarks. "We've gotten so focused on the wrong things that we've forgotten to tell people about the real power of the medical plan. We're spending way too much time talking about deductibles and copays. We've done ourselves a real disservice. We need to start focusing on value."

Health care "is the most emotionally sensitive issue facing your employees. You've got to show empathy. You don't want your workforce feeling like a bunch of victims," Ackley says.