

# For Open Enrollment, Communications Get Social

## Employers are using social media and texts to send benefits messages

Now that most of the U.S. population owns a smartphone, HR benefits managers have a new, direct way to get in touch with employees during open enrollment: social media and text messaging.

"Employers need to send creative messaging to meet the employees where they are," said Shelly McLean, a principal at benefits tech consultancy firm OneDigital Health and Benefits. She advises employers to "evolve their benefits communication plan to keep up with the times."

### Social Media

"Social media presents an opportunity to reach your employees, their dependents and even future employees about benefit and wellness topics," said Kristen Struys, a senior associate in Willis Towers Watson's talent and rewards practice.

"Some people like texting, some like e-mail, and others want to see information on an app," said Peter Marcia, CEO of YouDecide, a voluntary-benefits outsourcing firm. HR can do a better job "communicating with employees where they want to see it, how they want to see it, when they should see it," he said.

Struys recently shared these six tips for using social media such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other platforms to send reminders about open-enrollment offerings, dates and deadlines:

- 1. Survey your employees.** Is social media right for them? Will they want to participate? And if so, via which channels?
- 2. Select the platforms that make the most sense for your employees.** Then create a strategy for how you'll use them, including a communications plan for rolling them out.
- 3. Be upfront regarding the content you'll share.** Let employees know what they can expect to see on their social media feeds.
- 4. Craft a company social media policy that defines appropriate content and conduct.** Consider placing this as a featured post or including it on your company pages. The Society for Human Resource Management makes a sample social media policy accessible to its members.

**5. Consult with your legal team to draft a terms of agreement and privacy policy that communicates how the company will use any data it collects through social media.** Encourage employees to read this document.

**6. Gather your gatekeepers.** Social platforms depend on the give and take of human interaction to be effective, so assign an HR staff member to monitor and respond to employee questions and concerns in a timely manner.

Here are a few caveats from Kim Buckey, vice president of client services at DirectPath, a provider of personalized benefits education, enrollment and health care transparency services:

- **Social media can be "ideal for reminders about deadlines** and prompting employees to think about a new or underused benefit, but it's certainly not going to lend itself to a lengthy discussion of a particular plan type."
- **Some employees "may prefer to keep social media 'social,'** and they may not want to hear from their employer when they're checking their Twitter feed or looking at Instagram."
- **Different generations use different types of social media.** "While many Millennials live on Snapchat, a Baby Boomer may not even know what that is. Doing a little research as to what might be the most popular for your employee demographic is a great starting point."

To help employees become more comfortable receiving social media messages, "host an 'ask me anything' with your HR team on a site such as Twitter, and hashtag important keywords in social media posts," urged Whitney Cwirka, a senior content strategist for Benefitfocus, a provider of cloud-based benefits software.

Social media posts "shouldn't be the only way you communicate with employees but an additional channel within an integrated approach to get your message out," she said.

### Text Messaging

Texting "has proven to be very fruitful for certain workforces," especially for employees who aren't sitting at a desk and checking e-mail throughout the day, said Andy Edeburn, director of customer insights at Jellyvision, a maker of interactive benefits communication software. "If you have their personal cellphone numbers, a texting strategy designed around open enrollment can be a great tool," he said. "Finding the right timeline and cadence is important, but we've seen a simple four-or-five-message campaign get people involved who are otherwise hard to reach."

Ask employees' spouses or partners to provide their mobile numbers, said Jagdish Chugani, vice president of HR at PlanSource, provider of cloud-based benefits administration and HR technology. By including them in communications strategies, "you're leveraging directly those who often are the decision-makers."

Last year, Atara Biotherapeutics, a San Francisco-based biotech firm, began using text messages as part of its open enrollment communications. "Around Thanksgiving week, we sent text messages to remind people to make sure their enrollments were completed," said Stacy Solorio, senior director of HR operations at the firm.

Atara Bio also created a benefits e-mail address through which employees could submit questions directly to the firm's benefits broker.

These efforts proved successful, Solorio said, with fewer stragglers than in previous years and an on-time enrollment rate of 95 percent.

By Stephen Miller