

Communicating During Open Enrollment

BY RHODA WEISS

For Catholic hospitals, “open enrollment” is one of the most important times of the year to communicate with employees at local companies. During this period, most often held in the fall, employers offer their workers the opportunity to choose a health plan, medical group, or physicians for themselves and their families.

The decisions made during this critical time can have a dramatic effect on market share for your physicians and hospitals. More and more, hospitals are developing strategic communications plans to implement strategies that ensure their affiliated physicians and health plans are at the top of consumers’ minds before they complete their company’s enrollment card. Some of the more successful tactics used by Catholic health care providers include:

- Hosting health screenings or educational programs before and during open enrollment on-site at the local employer or at union gatherings (“selling” the organization during the program).
- Cosponsoring programs with local employers for benefits managers, insurance consultants, and other key executives that provide useful information about health benefits while also promoting the organization and physicians.
- Producing and widely distributing an online and print informational booklet on how to choose a health plan. These booklets typically answer frequently asked questions about open enrollment, provide tips on selecting a health plan and provider, demonstrate why their organization and doctors are the best choice, and include lists of primary care physicians.
- Publishing newspaper ads that list primary care physicians by location, physician group, and—in highly ethnic communities—foreign languages spoken by the physician or office staff. These ads encourage readers to select from a listing of preferred plans, emphasizing their links to the physicians, medical groups, or hospital sponsoring the ad. For instant answers to consumer questions, ads prominently feature



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24-hour telephone numbers, websites, and e-mail addresses. Some ads even list specific page numbers in health plan directories. Although many ads are directed to the general public, hospitals in areas with large employers often begin the copy by including the name of an employer at the top of the page (e.g., “Attention Boeing Employees”) during the company’s open enrollment period.

- Identifying local employers with company newsletters and offering to write articles that provide tips on choosing a health plan, physician, and hospital. Some company newsletters offer advertising space, which provides an additional opportunity to showcase their expertise and list reasons why their organization and physicians should be the preferred choice for care.
- Purchasing radio ads that call attention to open enrollment in general and mention specific names of businesses during their open enrollment periods. Include an easy-to-remember phone number, website, or e-mail address to obtain open enrollment or family health guides.
- Advertising on billboards near businesses before and during the open enrollment process can remind workers to select a plan that includes a particular hospital or medical group.
- Increasing media relations efforts that convince journalists to cover stories on interesting patient outcomes, new technologies and treatments, or the organization’s clinical expertise.
- Using physicians and executives to speak to business, religious, social, and civic organizations on health tips or current health care issues. All speakers should include information on open enrollment, illustrate the strengths of the local hospital and doctors, and distribute the open enrollment guide and other organization information.
- Remembering that employees, physicians, volunteers, vendors, and board members can provide word-of-mouth marketing during open enrollment and help distribute important information. These “family” members provide first-hand accounts of superior patient care. □

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