

Why Mobile Makes Sense for Benefits Communication

By Justyn Harkin

Regardless of whether any given health care organization has a formal bring-your-own device (BYOD) policy with security protocols and guidelines for complying with HIPAA regulations and protecting company networks, there's no denying the fact that employees own and use these devices. As anyone who's ever observed a colleague sneaking under-the-conference-table glances at the smartphone in his lap can tell you, mobile devices are already in the workplace, and they're here to stay.

In fact, it's this proliferation of wireless devices that's compelling some organizations to consider mobile channels in their benefits communications strategies. Because mobile represents one of the best ways to reach employees no matter when or where they work, such a move makes a lot of sense in today's corporate environment.

The year 2013 has several changes in store for employees and employers alike, and delivering clear, understandable communications about benefits options will be more important than ever. Rising health care costs, the declining health of the population, and Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) compliance are just some of the things that will affect and complicate the benefits packages in 2013 and beyond.

And in case you haven't noticed, mobile devices—cell phones and tablets—are everywhere, especially in health care organizations. They're on the hips of physicians and nurses, in the pockets of maintenance personnel, or within an arm's reach of just about any other employee. With the ability to receive text messages, access email and social media, and launch hundreds of useful (and an equal number of, let's admit it, time-wasting) apps, these devices are as powerful as they are ubiquitous.

Despite their prevalence, however, a surprising percentage of U.S. companies have not yet begun to include mobile in their benefits communication efforts. In fact, according to the 2012 Inside Benefits Communication Survey Report from Benz Communications¹, 72 percent of surveyed do not use any mobile tools at all. Furthermore, 67 percent of respondents say their companies don't optimize their benefits websites for mobile use, which is telling, because only 38 percent of American companies allow employees to access benefits information from computers beyond internal firewalls.

When it comes to benefits communication, failing to incorporate mobile is a missed opportunity. Depending on the message and circumstances, a fancy mobile app with GPS and social hooks might be the very best way to distribute benefits information, and in other circumstances, merely making sure the company's benefits website is optimized for mobile access can be just what the doctor—or nurse or technician or office worker—ordered.

The key is being able to reach employees, and employees are increasingly reachable via their mobile devices. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American

¹ 2012 Inside Benefits Communication Survey Report from Benz Communications

Life Project², 85 percent of American adults own cell phones, and of those cell- phone owners, 53 percent use items that can be classified as “smartphone” devices. Of course, the number of smartphone owners increases every day. According to The Nielsen Company, two thirds of new mobile device buyers are opting for smartphones over more simple feature phone devices.³

Now more than ever, mobile devices are changing the way people want to access and interact with information online. Market intelligence firm International Data Corporation (IDC) even projects that mobile devices will soon overtake the computer as America’s mode of choice for getting access to the Internet.⁴ Between 2010 and 2015, mobile Internet users will increase by a compound annual growth rate of 16.6 percent. As sales of smartphones and tablets continue to grow, the rate of traditional computer and laptop Internet access will decline, changing the way people access and interact with the information they seek on the Internet.

The effects of this change can already be seen in the context of health care and medical information. As of September 2012, 52 percent of smartphone owners have used their device to look up health information.

Benefits administrators at health care organizations wishing to reach the greatest number of employees must integrate mobile as an additional channel for benefits communication. Of course, traditional benefits communication techniques such as holding information sessions or sending information to employees’ home addresses should still be part of any benefits communication effort but the power and penetration of mobile devices as the next-gen tools for anytime, anywhere benefits communications can no longer be overlooked.

Justyn Harkin is a communications specialist at The Jellyvision Lab, provider of [ALEX](#)[®], the Jellyvision Benefit Counselor, a virtual, cloud-based human resources personality that effectively eliminates mundane, and often confusing, benefit communications.

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http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2012/PIP_MobileHealth2012.pdf

³ http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/two-thirds-of-new-mobile-buyers-now-opting-for-smartphones/

⁴ <http://www.idc.com/getdoc.jsp?containerId=prUS23028711>