The Path Forward for Healthcare Communications in a Rapidly Changing World
Executive Summary

In 2018 ongoing regulatory changes will continue to have a significant impact on the health care industry. As the implications of unending political change continue to unfold, many in the health care industry are bracing for potentially dramatic upheavals. There has never been a greater need for clear communication between health plans, health care services and the communities they serve.

Over the past several years, health care leaders and marketing teams have renewed concerns about whether their print and digital communications systems will be up to the task of adapting and responding to the scale and scope of these changes. As a health care leader, you must develop a robust network that can support your multichannel communication today and into the future.

As political and regulatory changes gain momentum it will be critical to take a more forward-thinking approach. You must proactively seek methods, technology and partners with proven track records of responding to rapid regulatory and technological changes, while adhering to strict compliance requirements.

To prepare for 2018 and beyond, marketers will need to evaluate their readiness in three key areas: Content, Process and Security.

Content

Health Literacy Drives Behavioral Changes

Recent research on communication conducted by Columbia Medical Review has sought to link clinician behaviors and skills to other important, but less immediate, clinical outcomes, such as patient recall, understanding treatment recommendations, and adherence to those recommendations. In these studies, the association of outcomes with clinicians’ communication skills was less consistent and less strong than in studies that focused on patient satisfaction.

The most consistent findings suggest that communication needs to adhere to basic principles of information transfer. For successful communication, ensure all health care messages:

- Are uncomplicated
- Are specific
- Use some repetition
- Minimize jargon
- Check patient understanding

More Multichannel than Ever

With the proliferation of digital messaging resources, CMOs are more likely to seek ways to execute communications across multiple channels. To explore broader lines of communications, the Society for Resource Management suggests that CMOs answer how the following communications delivery methods are being used:

- Electronic communication
- Webinars
- In-person meetings
- Use of social media
- Intranet posts
- Live hotlines for questions and concerns
- Emails and instant messaging
- Mailings to home addresses
**Process**

**Reap the Benefits of Efficient Execution**

With the variety of financial and quality imperatives facing the health care industry, proactive providers are seeking new programs and tools to maximize efficiency, while achieving critical goals. Unfortunately, the Institute of Medicine estimates that $765 billion of health care spending was wasted in 2010, with more than half attributable to unnecessary and inefficiently delivered services, as well as missed prevention opportunities.²

While not all of this waste can be attributed to ineffective or non-existent communication, the data clearly indicates that communication plays a significant role. Today, while there is less spending on print services (as consumers migrate into digital media), print continues to be a critical part of most health care organizations’ marketing and information mix.

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**Questions to Ask Yourself and Your Team**

When evaluating copywriting and design of your health care communications, be sure to ask these questions:

1. In what ways have we effectively conveyed complex information in simple terms for other health care clients?
2. How have we demonstrated deep understanding of our industry and specific patient populations we serve?
3. What are our proven creative and direct response marketing capabilities — across multiple channels — and what competitive advantages will they provide to new acquisition efforts?
4. What is the breadth of health care and regulatory experience of our team?
5. How can we find the right partners to support population health management efforts in the print and online world of today’s health care consumer?
Consider how our communications efforts can positively impact your business and bottom line by:

1. Reaching stakeholders, patients and health care providers with the right messages at the right times
2. Reinforcing consistent brand identity across multiple channels
3. Using technology and project management tools to optimize efficiency and minimize the burden on already overworked staff
4. Ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements
5. Reducing risk by working with vetted partners, signing Business Associate (BA) agreements for provider organizations

Financial Migration is Imminent
The Affordable Care Act was an enormous paradigm shift for health care CMOs, proving once again that change is a constant in this industry. For both hospital and health plan organizations, maintaining compliance in an ever-changing environment is a full-time and often challenging endeavor. Cost structures and budgets will likely have to evolve to account for:

- Financial pressure from structural reform in moving from fee-for-service to value-based care
- Increasing patient financial responsibility
- Wave after wave of more complex and costly regulatory hurdles from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS)
- Managing data that is subject to HIPAA compliance across various channels with multiple vendors

As CMOs explore multichannel options, they may be pleasantly surprised to see the latest advancements in technology. Variable data allows touchpoints to be customized and personalized for a more relevant and impactful experience, while still achieving cost efficiency. Gone are the days of storing preprinted material in inventory, only to see it wasted when the content requires updates due to regulatory or brand changes.
Questions to ask Yourself and Your Team
The vetting process for communications technology platforms should include questions that address stability and scalability:

1. How long has the platform been available in the market?
2. What are the platform's print, mail, email, digital and fulfillment capabilities?
3. Can the technology incorporate variable data into multichannel communications?
4. What type of reports are available?
5. Does the platform have the data analytics capabilities to align with continuous improvement initiatives?
6. Is the potential technology large enough to scale up to meet unexpectedly high volumes as the program expands?

Security

Protect Patients' Information — and Your Organization
Millions of dollars every year are lost to cybercrime and data breaches. And that number is only increasing. “We are seeing a shift in the causes of data breaches in the health care industry, with a significant increase in criminal attacks,” reported Dr. Larry Ponemon, chairman of Ponemon Institute. Indeed, since 2010 data breaches and digital attacks to health care institutes are up 125%. When selecting a print/communications vendor, it is essential to inquire about their ongoing and imbedded privacy and security measures.

The Columbia Medical Review recently emphasized that technology is beginning to play an important role in enhancing communication by improving connectivity and facilitating information flow: “While electronic health records and health information exchanges have provided more robust and consistent access to patient information, providers have been slow to change their practice to maximize these opportunities. Improving communication is essential if we are to transform into a value-oriented health care system. While there are many structural and cultural barriers to overcome, the good news is that there are patients, care providers, administrators, and entrepreneurs working together to achieve that goal.”

Technology Solutions That Work for You
With this move towards even more digital communication the need for documented security measures is vital. When evaluating the benefits of outsourcing, CMOs must also ask the right questions to ensure that all of their patient or member data is safe and secure. To ensure their business models don’t experience disruptions in communications efforts, CMOs are evaluating companies with the advanced IT infrastructures required to adapt to new patient or member communications mandates — whether in email, online, apps or print.
These leaders are acting now to minimize risk, avoid workflow inefficiencies and even protect revenue for their organizations. In contrast, those who wait are exposing their companies to operational risk and in the worst case scenario, a loss of revenue, reputation and trust.

Questions to ask Yourself and Your Team
To evaluate a technology offering, questions should focus on their infrastructure and policies for data security:

1. How robust is the technology provider’s IT infrastructure?
2. What best practices can the technology provider demonstrate in health care IT, including security auditing, SOC II and HITRUST certifications, Disaster Recovery (DR) and HIPAA compliance?
3. What documentation can be supplied to ensure compliance with privacy and security concerns?
4. What are the technology’s anti-spam and privacy capabilities?
5. What are the security/data policies?
6. What measures are in place to limit access to sensitive data?

Make an Informed Choice
As health care industry budgets tighten and demand for clearer communication grows, perhaps the greatest advantage a marketer can have in this competitive environment is to work with the right partner. When qualifying partners, be sure to ask questions about their industry experience, commitment to quality, options for multichannel fulfillment and IT security measures. Your organization will benefit from a streamlined workflow process and more effective campaign results, improving overall satisfaction and loyalty.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) opened up a new market for health insurance carriers. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that by the end of 2016, approximately 10 million individuals will be enrolled in coverage through the health insurance marketplaces created by the ACA.
References