



The role of communications

The biggest piece of social legislation since Medicare has passed. The sweeping healthcare reform bill will touch the lives of all Americans, and even more so for the 34 million who will now have health insurance. While there's broad agreement that the bill will fundamentally change the landscape of healthcare, there's little understanding of the particulars of change.

Here's where the role of communications is vital. The 2,400-page law requires skilled communicators to clarify what its complex provisions mean to Americans. A Kaiser Family Foundation poll found that 55% of US residents are "confused" by the new law, and 56% say they are unsure how the law will affect them.

The nation's physicians are not much more enlightened—Dr. Lori Hein, president of the American Academy of Family Physicians, said: "Not only is the public confused, but so are our members...there is a lot of misinformation in the media." The implications are further complicated by ambiguity in the bill's language and its complex time structure, with some provisions slated to go into effect this year while others will not be

operational until 2014. Overlaying this complexity are misperceptions about the bill. Cries of "socialized medicine" and "death panels" still echo in the public consciousness despite being discredited months ago.

Communications professionals in the healthcare industry have an obligation to cut through this confusion with clear facts about the new law and its impact on their stakeholders. This entails getting out in front of the issue with proactive outreach and accurate and timely information.

There are a few principles that will serve communicators well:

Addressing people's fears up front will help ensure that accurate info is heard

One size does not fit all. Explaining the benefits of the bill must be customized to the audience. Seniors are going to care about ensuring the solvency of Medicare and closing the gap in the "donut hole" prescription drug coverage. Employees will be interested in a host of preventative services that do not go against their co-pay. Communications must be segmented with the needs of each audience in mind.

All healthcare is personal. When communicating about something as intimate as healthcare, the importance of the emo-

tional component cannot be overstated. For most Americans, emotion trumps policy. Will I lose my doctor? Will I have choices under this new law? Until concerns like these are addressed, the larger facts of policy will be ignored. Addressing fears up front will help ensure that accurate information is heard.

Cool the rhetoric. Few issues are as highly politicized as health reform. Information about the new law will likely be filtered through the political lens of the individual. Present facts without value judgments on the law's merits or its specific provisions.

Be in it for the long haul. This law is the first step on the journey of health reform. The implementation of the bill will be a multi-year process, and inevitably there will be legislative modifications. There will be a need for accurate and consistent communications for many years to come.

Communication professionals are at the fulcrum of major change that affects all Americans. Our ability to clearly communicate what this new law is all about will be a big step in actualizing the promise of healthcare reform.

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