Patient-Centric Communications Efforts in the Healthcare Industry

“Health Literacy” remains in the news. According to a December 2018 article in the New York Times, more than half of older Americans lack the skills to gather and understand medical information.\(^1\) Kentucky is considering requiring a health literacy course for some to receive access to Medicaid.\(^2\)

The Health Literacy Initiative (HLI) within Intellus Worldwide was started to see how industry could address the issues that low health literacy creates in understanding healthcare communications. Previous work measured the impact of good communications practices to make materials more easily understood. The HLI fielded this follow-up study on Patient-Centric Communications to see how organizations are implementing these practices. Healthcare communications professionals and market researchers responded to this survey in October through December of 2018.

The Business Case for Clearer Health Communications

Certainly, improving health literacy in the US would improve health care, but we who create healthcare information and advertising have an obligation to do the best job we can to reach everyone. Plus, it’s just good business – people need to understand how and why to take their medication if we want them to fill and refill prescriptions. More than half of US prescriptions today are taken incorrectly or not at all.\(^3\)

In a 2017 study, the Health Literacy Initiative of Intellus found that by increasing efforts to reach low-health-literacy patients, the biggest improvement was seen in the group with “adequate” health literacy. The comprehension level was raised by over 30 percent, to a level indicating that almost everyone with adequate health literacy understood the basics about the drug.\(^4\)

How the Industry is Addressing this: Study Results

Despite being offered to a mailing list of 5500 people and further outreach through members’ social media, only 17 responses to this study survey were received. Perhaps there is an under-appreciation of the importance of attention to this area? The sample size is low but provides some anecdotal information from people who are concerned about improving communications.

Of the respondents who are involved in the research, production, or review of marketing and communications materials for patients, only half currently have any formal efforts in place to improve the clarity of their communications to patients; of that half, all had at least one of the following:

- Guidelines regarding copy, numbers and statistics, layout, website structure
- Formal analysis of compliance with principles (eg CDC Clear Communication Index Score Sheet)
- Formal training of marketers / marketing developers
- Working with patients to co-develop or test materials
• Working with a company that is expert in accessible communications
• Other aspects of accessibility, such as being friendly to screen readers for the visually impaired

These functions to improve the clarity of communications were centralized to a particular role or team for only one respondent, who was from a payer organization.

When asked what should be improved, respondents often referred to one or more items in the above list. Other comments included:

Formalized/consistent approach to communications, not just when it’s convenient.
Insurance and Reimbursement is a huge opportunity
Creating communities and forums to discuss patient related issues
Multi-lingual, larger type

One comment mentioned the need to improve pharmaceutical company “transparency,” which brings to mind a benefit not mentioned before – a complicated message is not only less effective, it also detracts from pharma companies’ public image.

About the Health Literacy Initiative

Further work planned by the HLI includes a study to estimate the ROI of improving materials using the same methods as those highlighted in the 2017 work. 4

The Intellus Health Literacy Initiative (HLI) provides leaders in health care marketing research with the tools and understanding required to address the needs of all patients. It is a collaboration of members across the health care industry including manufacturers, payers and agency organizations. By providing education, resources and training, the PMRG HLI works to drive change within our industry and at the FDA.

Intellus Worldwide (formerly PMRG and PBIRG) is an independent, non-profit trade association whose purpose is to stimulate the advancement of marketing research in the health care industry.


