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10 Tips
to Boost Telehealth Engagement

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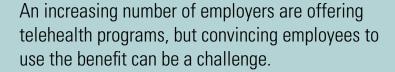Move the Goalposts With a Targeted Communication Strategy p 28

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An increasing number of employers are offering telehealth programs, but convincing employees to use the benefit can be a challenge.

10 Tips
to Boost Telehealth Engagement

by | **Reid Rasmussen**

Remember the old saying "Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door?"

It's not true. Even great mousetraps need promotion to be sold. The same is often true with new benefits such as telehealth services. Even though telemedicine offers a convenient and cost-effective alternative to traditional doctor's office visits, it can be difficult to convince employees to even try the benefit.

A 2017 survey by the National Business Group on Health found that only 20% of employers experience employee utilization rates of 8% or higher.[1]

Like the mousetrap, telemedicine may be a great idea, but it still needs to be promoted to get strong usage from employees. This article offers tips for increasing telehealth engagement.

First, it's important to understand what telehealth is and why engagement matters.

What Is Telehealth?

For the sake of this article, *telehealth* is defined as a remote primary care physician visit that may result in a prescription being called in if the doctor deems it appropriate. The "visit" is via phone or video, and the providers are board-certified U.S.-based doctors who are licensed in the state where the member is located. Typical visits include simpler but high-volume issues such as cold/flu, sinus/ear/bladder/respiratory infections, allergies, pink eye, etc.

Telehealth is not meant to replace a primary care physician and is not appropriate for all medical visits. When an issue is beyond the scope of a remote visit, the physician will guide patients to a specialist, an emergency room or their family physician. Telehealth doctors will not prescribe Drug Enforcement Association (DEA) controlled substances, nontherapeutic drugs or certain other drugs that may be harmful because of their potential for abuse.

What Does a Typical Telehealth Visit Look Like?

Here is a typical example: A plan member walks through some poison ivy on a Saturday and can't stand the itching by Monday. He doesn't have time to get to the doctor's office during the workday but doesn't want to go to the emergency room. Having already set up a health profile with his plan's telehealth provider, the plan member requests a telehealth visit and provides his symptoms. Within a short time frame, he receives a call from a licensed physician (potentially from another state) and answers questions like: "Are there bumps or not?" "Are they red or white?" "Is it warm to the touch?" The doctor gives a diagnosis, calls in a prescription if applicable and provides followup instructions.

How Is Telehealth Engagement Measured?

Simply add the number of telehealth phone/video visits a population had over a 12-month period. Divide that by the number of employees. That percentage is the engagement level. For example, if an employer has 100 employees with telehealth as part of their plan and they use telehealth 50 times in a year, the benefit is at a 50% annual engagement level (50 visits divided by 100 employees).

How Much Does a Telehealth Visit Save?

A set of studies estimated that the average telehealth visit saves about $500 in unnecessary claims costs and wasted time. The five studies were conducted in partnership with Teladoc (a telehealth provider), Veracity Analytics and Dr. Niteesh Choudhry, a professor and researcher at Harvard Medical School. Although the types of health issues addressed are simple, they are not handled only in low-cost doctor office visits. Some patients might have visited the emergency room or used other higher cost services if they didn't have telemedicine as an option. Collectively, the analyses were based on claims data spanning January 2011 through May 2016. These studies examined four different national U.S. populations covering 1.8 million beneficiaries and 22,000 telehealth visits. The studies found the average telehealth visit saved $472 in unnecessary claims (from emergency room/urgent care/doctor office visits, as well as other followup/readmission visits otherwise needed), plus two hours of saved work time at $23/hour.[2]

How Much Usage Is Normal?

The most common place people are introduced to a basic telehealth service is as part of their health plan. With little

takeaways

- A set of studies estimates that the average telehealth visit can save $500 in unnecessary claims costs and wasted time.
- Telehealth programs average usage of about 1-2% of employees at many companies.
- Usage rates increase when telehealth visits are free for the member to use.
- Requiring or incentivizing employees to set up a health profile at the launch of a telemedicine benefit also can drive increased usage.
- Getting company executives to promote a telehealth program and instructing middle managers about how to encourage employees to use the benefit increases acceptance and utilization.

promotion or personalization, such programs average 1-2% usage (that's one or two visits per 100 employees per year). On the other end of the spectrum, the employers quoted in the sidebar have a usage rate of more than 80%.

As you can see, there are many reasons to improve telehealth usage in your plan. If you have a self-funded medical plan, every visit has the potential to save you as much as $500.

Ten Tips for Increasing Use of a Telehealth Benefit

1. Evaluate Visit Fees

Most telehealth plans (such as those included with most medical plans) charge a visit fee of about $45 per use (some as high as $75). Other telehealth plans charge the employer a monthly membership fee, but there is no visit fee when members use the benefit. This one plan design difference is the single biggest driver of telehealth usage. The author's discussions with telehealth vendors have revealed that average usage levels jump to as high as 20% when plans remove this visit-fee disincentive.

As you consider this choice, be sure your consultant or vendor does the return on investment (ROI) math to understand the breakeven point. They should show at what point your company will be better off paying a few dollars more on a monthly basis for the $0 visit fee option. Then ask if they'll give you a performance guarantee to limit your risk.

2. Require or Incentivize Employees to Set Up a Health Profile at Launch

The second most powerful way to drive usage of telehealth is to have employees activate their telehealth accounts, which usually includes completing a health profile. Each vendor handles this a little differently, but in most cases it's a simple ten-minute process online or over the phone. Plans that do this triple their telehealth usage.

During the setup, users answer questions that mirror the clipboard they fill out at every urgent care center or doctor office visit. In these few minutes, members are more likely to understand that this is a "real thing." Their belief, confidence and curiosity in a telehealth visit may rise dramatically. In addition, the member is now familiar with where and how to reach out for a visit when illness strikes weeks or months later.

How do you achieve this? Require employees to activate their accounts in the first 30 days. Whether it requires sim-

Real-World Tips

During a recent panel discussion, employers that offer telehealth benefits offered the following comments on strategies for increasing employee use of the benefit.

"Senior management really helped get the word out about the benefits to the organization regarding [telehealth]. We had senior managers give their own testimonials about how they used it."

—Tony Ginyard, director of human resources
The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina

(The church has an 86% telehealth engagement rate: 122 virtual visits by 142 employees over a 12-month period.)

"We showed our staff how much the average staff member would save by using online/phone consults. Staff members quickly saw that they would not incur an out-of-pocket copay—That's money in their pockets."

—Tony Ginyard

"We set up a challenge during our health fairs and raffled off some gift cards. Our people had to download the app and set up their health profiles. If they showed me a screenshot or brought me their phone proving that they set up their health profile, they received bonus tickets for raffle prizes."

—Haley Archer, human resources generalist
City of Roanoke, Texas

(The city has a telehealth engagement rate of 116%: 144 virtual visits by 124 employees over a 12-month period.)

"Give real-life examples and testimonies from teammates to spread the word. Use it—then spread the word. You can't preach it if you aren't doing it yourselves."

—Kathryn Vines, senior director of human resources
Thrive Holdings, Dallas, Texas

(The company has a 126% telehealth engagement rate: 147 virtual visits by 117 employees over a 12-month period.)

ply asking employees, providing incentives or making it mandatory will vary with the employer. Remember, you're not hurting your people with this—It'll merely help them take the headache out of health care for them when they feel sick.

3. Hold an Active Launch

The question that drove this article is "How do some telehealth programs get so *much* usage?" However, with many programs achieving just 1-2% usage, the opposite question needs to be asked: "Why do some telehealth programs get so little usage?"

The answer is this: They never launch it in the first place.

For example, tens of millions of people in the U.S. have a basic telehealth service included in their medical plan. But most members won't find it in the plan booklet. It's buried in the health plan materials as the 399th-most-important thing. Enrollment meetings are a flurry of details around changes in insurance plans, networks, copays, deductibles, out-of-pocket costs and, of course, the premium increase. Because most people aren't told about telehealth, they have absolutely no idea that it was even an option.

Therefore, make a plan to announce the launch of telehealth. It doesn't need to be complex. Even three minutes in that enrollment meeting will make a dramatic difference. Especially if you focus on the other tips here.

Other ways to launch:

- Do it once a year separate from the open enrollment period.
- Do it during your department meetings.
- Run a pilot with key influencers during the midyear, then have those internal advocates launch it to the whole company.
- Send preenrollment meeting emails announcing a new service that'll be coming.

4. Garner Executive Support

It's one thing for a human resources (HR) team member to take a few minutes to promote a new program. But employees consider a benefit program as more important when people from the executive team go out of their way to discuss it.

A quick announcement letter or email—even better, a personal story—at the enrollment meeting is memorable. Even if it's simply to say, "We highly recommend this as a way for you to get better control of your health care dollars. It'll save you money, time and frustration and will help keep our medical plan rates down as a result. We're paying for this

program for you but will cancel it if you don't use it. We hope you find value in it."

5. Focus on WIIFM

In recent years, employees expect benefit changes to be cuts in benefits and increases in costs. Remember to focus on *WIIFM*: What's in it for me? It's worth calling out that this new program may be simpler and less expensive than a visit to an urgent care center. You almost have to shock them and repeat what you're saying for them to realize they understood what you said.

You may have heard the saying "Benefits tell, stories sell!" People respond to stories, so try telling one like this:

"You get home from work tonight and hear your daughter's ear hurts again. You're sure it's her fifth ear infection, but you need an antibiotic or else you might need to skip work tomorrow. What are your choices? Spend three hours of your Tuesday evening with a bunch of sick people in an urgent care center and pay $165.

Or: you can have a telehealth visit from the comfort of your couch and get a prescription called in if the doctor believes it's appropriate. And instead it won't cost you anything. (Or only $45—See tip 1). That's a great deal for everyone, right?"

6. Teach the "How"

Many of these tips have been about telling people *why* they should use telehealth. But an important piece of the promotions is explaining the simplicity of *how* to use telehealth.

Telehealth can be simple to use. Emphasize that. Explain the simple steps of using it. Make sure everyone knows where to call, what app to download or what website to use. Depending on your vendor, it'll be something close to this:

1. Set up a health profile.
2. Call to request a visit.
3. The physician will contact you for a consultation.
4. Get a treatment plan, including a prescription called in to your chosen pharmacy if appropriate.
5. The physician's notes from the visit can be sent to your family doctor.

This sets the right expectations and helps people picture that this isn't a prescription-writing service. It's good to let them know that sometimes the physician won't be prepared to write a prescription, or sometimes they will have to send them elsewhere. This limits the number of people who will be upset if they don't get a prescription.

7. Provide Incentives to Complete Key Steps

A few key actions prepare people to engage. Sometimes employees need a nudge to prioritize things they know they should do.

You'll want to encourage different actions during the life-cycle of your program. Steps might include downloading the telehealth app, logging in to the telehealth website, completing a (one-time) health profile, doing the same for their spouse and/or children, submitting a testimonial, etc.

8. Coach Managers to Drive Usage

In companies with a few hundred or more employees, middle managers are the biggest influencers of telehealth usage (outside of the tips listed above). They set the tone for sick days.

Most managers are terrified to say something to their staff that'll "get them sued." As a result, they won't talk about health issues that impede on work hours. If an employee calls in saying she's sick and won't be coming to work, a manager might be afraid to say anything. Teach your managers to say, "OK, if this is something that can be handled by telehealth, be sure to call for a visit. I want you to get better—It's why the company pays for this service. I encourage you to call."

It's new for managers to realize they can express appropriate concern and compassion by encouraging a visit, and it doesn't cross a line of inappropriateness. As Kathryn Vines expressed in the sidebar, it's easier for a manager to enthusiastically encourage this if they've used it before.

9. Drip Communication Campaigns

Most surveys on benefit communications agree: Employees don't want to hear about all their benefit programs in one meeting per year. It's too much! Most of them stop listening after they learn their new rate for medical insurance.

Drip email campaigns have proven to be extremely effective at keeping telehealth top of mind. In the author's experience, these campaigns double usage levels. Some vendors have turnkey email campaign programs—If so, be sure to provide employee emails. If not, create your own campaign.

Most vendors also have promotional content such as fliers, posters, refrigerator magnets, table tents, postcards, etc. Tap all such materials.

bio

Reid Rasmussen is the co-founder and chief executive officer of freshbenies, an engagement platform that combines practical tools such as telehealth, online doctors, advocacy and consumerism savings networks to help people control their health care. He previously worked for two health insurance carriers and two general agencies. He holds a B.S. degree in health administration from the University of Victoria.

10. Personalize Your Promotion

Nobody knows your company like you do. You've spent years developing your own internal culture. Work within your culture. Use knowledge of your people to decide whether the following suggestions will work or should be modified.

- Consider inviting spouses to a launch meeting during which attendees activate their accounts.
- Hold lunch-and-learns.
- Create a 30-second video from the CEO.
- Set up a computer for people to complete their health profiles.
- Run videos in the lunchroom.
- Add posters in bathroom stalls.
- Throw a pizza party when 100% of people have activated their accounts.
- Ask supervisors to have direct conversations with their teams.
- Play a game between departments to activate their accounts.
- Promote it at the health fair.

What will work for you?

Just like the mousetrap, people don't beat a path to the telehealth door either. But with smart promotion, employees will engage with telehealth, and it may become a highly appreciated and highly used benefit. **ⓑ**

Endnotes

1. National Business Group on Health, *Large Employers' 2018 Health Care Strategy and Plan Design Survey.* Available at www.businessgrouphealth.org/news/nbgh-news/press-releases/press-release-details/?ID=334.

2. Dorsey and Topol, "State of Telehealth," *New England Journal of Medicine,* March 2016; and Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015.

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