

“ Our  
Hope Health  
Custom  
newsletter is  
important  
in ongoing  
outreach and  
education,  
and supports  
employees  
in their  
efforts to  
improve  
their health.”

— Brooke Bascom,  
Director of Communications

# Successful Employee Communications

*Case study from:*  
**King County**

A woman with long brown hair and blue eyes is looking slightly to the right. She is holding a blue sign with the Hope Health logo, which features the word "HOPE" in large, bold, white letters with a heart shape inside the letter "O", and the word "HEALTH" in smaller, white, sans-serif letters below it. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with other people and buildings.

HOPE  
HEALTH

# Health Matters

King County, Seattle, WA

Employee base: 14,000

**K**ing County encompasses an area with 1.8 million people living in 39 different communities. It is the home to Starbucks, the University of Washington, Microsoft, and the city of Seattle, from its magnificent downtown on picturesque Puget Sound to the dramatic backdrop of the Cascade Mountains. The employee wellness program serves a workforce even more diverse than its terrain, from city bus drivers to landfill operators, county administrative staff, and park rangers.

“Not everyone sits at a desk in front of a computer,” said Brooke Bascom, Communications Director for the King County Health Reform Initiative, who oversees the custom newsletter content as part of her job promoting health for county employees. “One of our biggest challenges is to leap the digital divide,” said Bascom. “The newsletter is a perfect way of doing that.”

The Hope Health custom newsletter — mailed to employees at home — is the preferred way to reach them, said Bascom, who cited a survey showing that 98% of surveyed employees ranked the Health Matters newsletter as the most useful information source over global e-mail, posters, brochures, and even the HR Web page.

“The newsletter is the most effective way of reaching all our employees,” said Bascom. “It allows us to send something to their homes, and surveys show they read it.”

The county’s Healthy Incentives<sup>SM</sup> benefits program starts in January. Employees’ out-of-pocket expenses are directly tied to their willingness to participate in wellness activities.



*The King County custom newsletter, designed by Hope Health, contains about 70% King County — specific information on benefits blended into the distinctive Hope Health wellness content.*

*The eight-pager, called Health Matters, is distributed monthly by bulk mail to 14,000 employees at home and thereby reaches all health plan members and their covered spouses and domestic partners.*

The newsletter ties the benefits information to health promotion initiatives by keeping employees informed about the incentives and reinforcing the importance of participation in the health risk assessment (HRA) and follow-up wellness programs.

“Our main incentive,” said Bascom, “is lower copays and out-of-pocket expenses. Employees receive the same benefits whether or not they participate in the wellness initiative, but their out-of-pocket expenses are much lower if they participate in wellness activities.”

Just for taking the HRA, for example, an employee pays less out of pocket. As a follow-up to the HRA, if they sign up for an individual action plan that may include health coaching by phone to manage a risk or condition, the employee could pay hundreds less out of pocket for benefits.

“It doesn’t matter what the results [of the HRA] are,” said Bascom. “We’re trying to engage employees in improving their health.”

The newsletter itself contains snippets of information about local bike events, walks, runs, and learning sessions — all of which support employees in their efforts to improve their health.

“The newsletters drive employees to the Web because we put more updated information on there (for example: newsletters come out once a month, information on the Web is updated twice a month),” said Bascom.

The HRA and individual action plans dominate the first half of the year. To keep employees engaged and active for the following few months, Bascom and her team have developed the Live Well Challenge, in which employees form active teams. The newsletter reports on team progress, winners, and hoopla surrounding the friendly competition.

“The newsletter is important in ongoing outreach and education and reminds employees of all the activities available to them throughout the year,” said Bascom. Every month, newsletter stories dovetail with education campaigns or remind employees of deadlines (for example, to finish their action plans or take wellness assessments).

“Being able to customize is necessary,” she said, “and really good health information in the newsletter fits right in with what we’re trying to teach our employees.”



*For each month’s issue, wellness staff review the suggested Hope Health articles and decide which ones support current wellness programming and which to replace with county-specific benefits information. The result is a comprehensive newsletter with a great balance of health and King County-specific information.*

*More than 90% of eligible county employees and insureds took the wellness assessment (HRA) — a participation rate well above industry averages of 50%. The newsletter is credited with being the most-read communication vehicle promoting the benefits incentives among county employees.*

It helps when the senior administrator is entirely on board with the plan. King County Executive Ron Sims saw health costs going up and wanted to “do something.” Bascom said Sims didn’t want to cut benefits or increase premiums.

His advisory task force suggested a two-pronged strategy: Bring down the cost of care by improving quality. The county’s membership in the Puget Sound Health Alliance is taking that avenue. The second strategy was to improve the health of employees and prevent the kinds of chronic diseases that are most costly to treat. Conditions such as heart disease and diabetes can be modified by behavior, and Sims charged Bascom and the team to run with that.



*Nearly every single employee who took the HRA then enrolled in an individual action plan — again, participation far higher than typical worksite enrollments. High-risk participants improved or eliminated one or more risk factors. Ongoing programming, highlighted in the monthly newsletter, kept employees engaged and on track with their wellness goals. Monthly reports measure hits on the Web pages. Spikes are seen on pages mentioned in the newsletter each month.*

\*Accomplishments were compiled for the years 2005-2007.