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— Giselle Sampson
Manager, Benefits & HR Risk

Successful Employee Communications

Case study from:
REI, Inc.



HOPE
HEALTH

REI HUB

Kent, WA

Employee base: 9,000

How does a company ranked 27 on the 100 Best Places to Work roster communicate to its employees?

Washington-based REI (Recreational Equipment, Inc.) uses a combination of print newsletters and brochures to communicate benefits and health information. The print media drive employees to the company's intranet site that hosts human resources information.

Rei is the world's premier outdoor gear store with more than 90 retail outlets across the country and massive online stores at www.REI.com and www.REI-OUTLET.com.

Known for its high-quality gear and knowledgeable sales team, REI is the largest consumer cooperative, with more than 3 million active members. The company is as concerned about wellness environment inside its stores as it is about the great outdoors. The challenge for Giselle Sampson, Manager of Benefits & HR Risk, and the leadership team at the Kent, WA corporate location is how best to communicate with more than 9,000 employees in their retail locations spanning the country from Washington to Rhode Island and Minnesota to Texas.

"We measure employee engagement in several ways," said Sampson, "two of which are through employee surveys." REI conducts an annual employee survey that shows an employee engagement score of 79% — much higher than scores tallied for other retailers.

Yet communicating with this highly teamwork-oriented but geographically diverse workforce remained a challenge. The leadership team charged Sampson with the task of communicating benefits information on a regular basis.

"We absolutely needed a way to talk to our employees," Sampson said. She garnered the support of REI's senior leaders with a branded newsletter and worked with Hope Health to get the right look and feel that appealed to REI employees. She blended benefits and health promotion into one newsletter.



The HUB — REI's version of a Hope Health Custom newsletter — is an acronym for the three principles that guide the company's employee benefits: Health, Understanding and Balance.

Unlike many other companies that elect to mail newsletters to employees at home, REI puts the newsletter in each employee's private mail slot in retail store locations. The employees' names are laser imprinted on the newsletter before Hope Health ships newsletters to more than 90 stores.

“Our benefits-eligible retail employees had no time or privacy at work to read benefits information,” Sampson said. Even logging onto the company intranet site on the cash register screens didn’t afford privacy needed for employees to view sensitive benefit communications. They were likely missing out on a number of programs.

“Mailings to homes weren’t necessarily getting attention. People get mail and maybe go through it later, so we had a real need to communicate to employees about our programs at a place we know they would be engaged. And that’s at work during a break, where they have time to think about their benefits,” Sampson said. Each employee has a private mail slot and the ability to receive mail in the stores.

Innovations like this are why REI is among the 100 Best Places to Work. “We don’t apply [for the award] because we want to be on the list. We think REI is a great place to work, and we want everyone to know it,” said Sampson. “We just do what we do because we think it’s right for our employees.” And that’s what has earned REI a spot on the list for the past consecutive 10 years and every year since Fortune magazine released its first list.

Sampson worked with Hope Health to build the REI look and feel into the newsletter. Hope Health created a total custom-look to the newsletter that featured outdoor graphics such as camping, hiking, and rock climbing, and REI’s logo and hunter green corporate color. Why? “Because employees won’t read it if it comes from someone else,” Sampson said.

The first newsletter came out ahead of the open enrollment period in 2006 and contained vital benefits information. “Hope nailed the brand out of the starting gate,” Sampson said.

Sampson measures the success of the benefits communication in many ways. First and foremost, “employees love the newsletter,” she said. “They always talk about the articles.” Sampson is referring to the delightful Hope-style health articles on physical activity, lifestyle, nutrition, and recipes that are interspersed with REI benefits information in the eight-pager that comes out three times a year.



To target specific health issues, Hope Health converts selected brochures to the REI look and binds them into the newsletters. Recently, custom brochure inserts focused on supporting healthy behaviors and smart use of the health plan. For example, one brochure on generic drug use helped reinforce a company-wide effort to reinforce their use. The brochure was co-produced with Hope Health and The Puget Sound Health Alliance.

“We can formally and informally measure what employees are thinking about,” said Sampson. Articles, for example, on a smoking cessation program or the company’s paid sabbaticals stimulate calls to the employee service center, operated out of the HR department.

“The team there is capable of assessing that employees saw an article and are reacting to it. Employees also e-mail the center,” she said.

“The HUB newsletter also informs employees about things we have to offer that they may miss in meetings at the stores or in distribution centers. Shift workers may miss the daily management huddles where a manager talks about a new benefit,” Sampson said. The newsletter fills this gap in communication.

“We don’t have HR folks at each store,” Sampson said, “so we have to rely on employees to read materials. The question is how much of employee time do you want them to spend trying to figure out how benefits work.” The informative newsletter moves employees along the learning curve.

Can Sampson show results? “Our health-care costs are low relative to the retail industry,” she said. “We have a relatively healthy group of employees.”



A recent survey of HUB readers revealed...

- *93% of employees read or browse the newsletter.*
- *58% feel the newsletter has improved their health.*
- *44% say the newsletter helps them manage stress better.*
- *37% credit the newsletter for helping them make more informed health-care decisions.*
- *62% think the newsletter is easy to read and filled with valuable health information and useful company-specific information.*

**Survey conducted online in August 2006 by Hope Health.*