Introducing the Physician Communication Toolkit

Strategies and Tools to Reach 100% of the Medical Staff
We all know communication is a powerful tool—it not only helps physicians understand and believe in health system strategy, it is essential to drive practice change. But to work, messages must be heard. And when CMOs communicate high-priority messages, **they’re not reaching **100%** **of the medical staff**.

**Toolkit in Brief**

Physician executives are in a tough spot. It’s more critical than ever to generate awareness and buy-in among the medical staff in support of organizational priorities. But, it’s becoming more difficult to actually reach physicians. They’re inundated with information—they don’t know who and what to listen to, especially when their time away from patients is so limited. Too often, the hospital’s critical messages become part of that communication noise. This means executives are spending a lot of their time communicating, but they are not being heard.

Despite these real challenges, there are tested strategies and tactics organizations can use to inform and engage physicians. The Physician Executive Council has built the Physician Communication Toolkit to connect physician executives and communication staff with these solutions.

This toolkit overview is organized by four key communication imperatives. Within each imperative, readers will learn high-level strategies and get a glimpse of the resources available in the Physician Communication Toolkit. The toolkit offers benchmarks, templates, tips, and step-by-step tools to help leaders and staff save time and avoid common pitfalls. The full version of the toolkit is available online and can be accessed any time, by anyone at your organization.

**Sources**

Pages 1, 8, 10, & 12: Advisory Board Survey Solutions—Physician Engagement survey and analysis, 2014.


Physician Executive Council interviews and analysis.

**Endnote**

1) Represents 41% independent physicians and 59% affiliated or employed physicians, which includes, “Affiliated through an exclusive contract to provide services,” “Employed through a contract,” and “Employed through a medical group.”
Over half of physicians report they’re not kept informed of their organization’s strategic plans. But physician executives communicate with physicians all the time. What’s the disconnect?

**There are two issues here.**

The first is CMOs spend a lot of time on non-scalable communication, meaning one-on-one or small group conversations. They typically talk to physicians at the tail ends of the performance spectrum—either the disengaged physician outliers, or plugged-in, energized physicians who voluntarily provide their input on key initiatives. While face-to-face communication will remain important for critical messages, it’s simply not scalable. And it means that physician executives aren’t connecting at all with the silent majority.

The second issue is that, while organizations may have scalable communication efforts in place, like e-mail lists, newsletters, or physician portals, these efforts are not particularly effective. Physicians tune out these messages because they’re too often hospital-centric, irrelevant, and not mobile-friendly.
The good news is four strategies can help you **revamp your communication strategy** and get critical messages to all physicians on your medical staff.

This briefing is organized around four imperatives to build an effective physician communication strategy.

**Imperative #1: Build a Scalable Communication Platform**

**Imperative #2: Curate Physician-Centered Content**

**Imperative #3: Deliver Attention-Grabbing Messages**

**Imperative #4: Facilitate Forums for Meaningful Dialogue**

This overview offers specific strategies and case studies for each, and outlines the accompanying implementation resources available through the online Physician Communication Toolkit.

Before diving in, let’s discuss who should use the **Physician Communication Toolkit**.
Communication with physicians is a team effort; it will require the involvement of senior clinical executives, physician leaders, and communication staff. Each group has a different, “top of license” role to play.

For instance, physician executives will oversee the organization’s physician communication strategy—identifying opportunities, assessing how to make messages resonate with physicians, and responding to physician feedback.

The communication team will be handling day-to-day operations—managing listservs, crafting compelling and mobile-friendly emails, and testing physician communication preferences.

The toolkit offers resources intended to support each of these groups.

The tools will be marked as follows:

- Executive and Physician Leaders
- Communication Staff
- Executive and Physician Leaders, as well as Communication Staff
Access the comprehensive Physician Communication Toolkit now. Here’s a quick recap of what you’ll find.

**Resources for Communication Staff**

- Physician Communication Plan Template and Example
- Listserv Management Tactics
- Red Flag Audit

**Resources for Physician Leaders**

- Staffing Tips for Physician Communication Roles
- Red Flag Audit

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**IMPERATIVE #1: Build a Scalable Communication Platform**

- Physician Communication Plan Template and Example
- Staffing Tips for Physician Communication Roles
- Red Flag Audit

**IMPERATIVE #2: Curate Physician-Centered Content**

- Sample Newsletter: Highlighting Innovation
- Sample Newsletter: Tech-Knowledge
- Content Submission Form
- Physician WIFM Prompt
- Sample Email: Patient Experience

**IMPERATIVE #3: Deliver Attention-Grabbing Messages**

- Data-Driven Tips for Getting Physicians to Open Emails
- Tips for Creating Mobile-Friendly Emails
- How to Test Physician Email Preferences
- “Write Better, Right Now” webconference and infographic
- Making a Successful Video
- Twitter Tips

**IMPERATIVE #4: Facilitate Forums for Meaningful Dialogue**

- How to Enhance Your Physician Surveys (coming soon)
- Case Studies on Soliciting Structured Feedback
- “What Do Physicians Want to Hear?” webconference
Build a **Scalable Communication Platform**

Saying everything *seven different ways, seven different times* is not a communication strategy, but that’s the route most organizations take.

The problem is, over-communicating is a vicious cycle. When messages are being ignored, leaders are more likely to send more messages through more channels. This undercuts the potency of the message and leads physicians to tune out.

**Solutions**

An effective strategy cuts through the communication noise by matching messages to the right channels. You can think about your strategy as a communication hierarchy. Send only the most important information through “push channels”—either through an alert in the EMR or emails. When you dial down the frequency of email, that extra information has to go somewhere, like a physician portal. Portals are helpful for keeping emails succinct—emails can provide links back to the portal, which can provide more comprehensive information. Finally, other communication mechanisms like mailings, posters, and flyers, can reinforce key messages.

This communication hierarchy offers a principled way to control the volume and frequency of emails. Physicians are less likely to become overwhelmed and more likely to know what’s important.
Physician Communication Plan Template and Example
Use this customizable Excel-based communication plan template to build an organized action plan for creating and communicating critical messages to physicians.

Listserv Management Tactics
Learn how to gather and keep physician emails up-to-date, segment listservs, and ensure physicians aren’t receiving duplicative emails.

Staffing Tips for Physician Communication Roles
Review physician communication staffing models and read a case study on onboarding and accountability mechanisms for staff.
Curate Physician-Centered Content

We asked physicians what one change they would make to their organization’s current communication approach. Here’s what they said:

- “Shorter, to-the-point emails with better subject lines.”
- “Make it more personal and less corporate. Human being to human being.”
- “Stop sending out emails intended for the hospital staff to all of the primary care physicians in remote locations.”
- “We get so much junk email, it’s hard to figure out what really applies to us.”

A lot of the communication amounts to noise, making it impossible for physicians to tease out which emails they should be reading. All too often, the important information gets lost.

Solutions

1. **Create a communication compact with physicians.** At St. Rita’s Medical Center, the CMO makes a verbal commitment to new physicians that they will receive only relevant and important messages. In return, the CMO asks each physician to share an email address he or she regularly checks. It’s a simple compact, but it sets clear expectations for both parties.

2. **Evolve the content of messages to map to what you know physicians are interested in.** Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta uses JangoMail to review physician open-rates and found hospital-based physicians opened newsletters twice as much as primary care physicians. So, they added PCP-relevant topics to the newsletter, which doubled the open rate for PCPs.

3. **Lead with the physician WIFM: “What’s in it for me?”** For physician communication to drive buy-in and action, every message must lead with the answers to the questions: What does this issue look like from a physician point of view and why should they care? Then, to create a shared sense of purpose, connect the dots between the physician role, the organization’s strategy, and what’s going on in health care.
Tools

Physician WIFM Prompt

Use this tool to construct more persuasive messages by considering, “What’s in it for me?” from the physician perspective.

Sample Newsletter: “Highlighting Innovation”

Read this newsletter from Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta to see how they introduced physicians to the concept of their new clinically-integrated network. The newsletter is effective because it explains how market trends have informed the hospital’s strategy and outlines the resulting impact on physicians and patients.

Sample Newsletter: “Tech Knowledge”

See how CHRISTUS Santa Rosa evolved their communications based on feedback from physicians concerned about their EMR strategy. CHRISTUS created a “Tech-Knowledge” newsletter to address common misperceptions and highlight new EMR functionality.

Sample Email: Patient Experience

Messages to physicians should always address the topic from their perspective. Read this email to see how to discuss the importance of patient experience in relation to what physicians care about—clinical quality, their reputation, and their unique role on the care team.

Content Submission Form

Use University of Iowa’s content submission form to streamline the vetting process of messages to physicians.
Deliver **Attention-Grabbing Messages**

Getting physicians to **open emails** is a huge challenge. Physicians aren’t at desks. And like most of us on the go, they’re reading email on phones and tablets.

**Solutions**

**Create catchy, mobile-friendly emails to improve open-rates.** Eight in ten physicians use smartphones in their daily practice, and 61% rely on email for updates from the organization. Consider investing in email analytics to determine what makes physicians click.

**Reach new audiences through alternative channels.** Email is here to stay, but texting, Twitter, and other mobile-friendly channels are worth considering to cut through the clutter. Try something new with a smaller group of physicians you think will be most receptive, and then look to expand.
Tools

Data-Driven Tips for Getting Physicians to Open Emails
Curious what subject lines are more likely to get physicians to open an email? Take a look at our analysis of physician open rates for our daily e-newsletter, the Daily Briefing, and learn what gets physicians to click.

Methodology in Brief:
• The Advisory Board Company emails the Daily Briefing once a day during the work week to 111,482 subscribers; the 2014 year-to-date average open rate is 17.91%

Tips for Creating Mobile-Friendly Emails
Most physicians use phones daily to check email. Access this tool to help you select the appropriate layout for a mobile-friendly email.

How to Test Physician Email Preferences
Learn how to test, analyze, and respond to physician open- and click-rate patterns.

“Write Better, Right Now” Infographic
No matter what your job, everyone needs to know how to write clearly and gracefully. Download our infographic for a few tricks to help.

Twitter Tips
Download a list of key considerations for developing a personal or professional Twitter presence.
Facilitate Forums for Meaningful Dialogue

So far we’ve focused on sending better mass communication to physicians. But good communication isn’t only about getting your message out. Communication is a two-way street; too often, administrators are not encouraging meaningful dialogue with physicians. And if you’re not talking with physicians, you are sacrificing their engagement. Many key strategies are going to depend on physician input. And it’s critical that you find ways to connect with the entire medical staff, not just engaged physicians or outliers.

Solutions

Organizations who do connect with a large portion of physicians use two approaches.

1. Expand existing feedback forums to include physicians who wouldn’t typically have the chance to interact with administration.

2. Ask for structured feedback. This ensures responses are actionable and relevant.

Physician Responses to Question:

“When aspect of this organization’s strategy do you most want to weigh-in on?”

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Tools

Case Studies on Soliciting Structured Feedback
Learn from three organizations that have used online forums, surveys, and in-person meetings to encourage structured, productive dialogue with physicians.

“What Do Physicians Want to Hear?” Webconference
Learn data-driven recommendations on physician communication preferences. In addition to reporting broad trends, we dive into the communication preferences across different physician cohorts.
Concluding Thoughts

The saying, “when it comes to change, you can’t over-communicate,” isn’t exactly right. That wisdom might work for one or two changes in isolation, but health care organizations are managing many significant changes simultaneously. Over-communicating each and every one will quickly lead to change fatigue.

You need to strike a balance. If you communicate too little, physicians won’t understand their critical role in care transformation. And rumors will replace information gaps.

But, too much information isn’t much better—you just end up exhausting (or worse—irritating) your physicians. Our Physician Communication Toolkit can help you and your communication team find that balance.

**Physician Discomfort with Change Versus Amount of Communication**

- Not enough information causes confusion, opens the door for rumors...
- ...but too much information causes change fatigue
The solution to finding the right balance doesn’t lie in just creating a better communication strategy. After all, the amount of communication often reflects the amount of change going on at an organization. If physicians are tuning out, it may be an indication of a larger, strategic problem—that the organization is doing too much at once and asking too much of physicians.

But that shouldn’t be a reason to miss out on the opportunities of this critical moment in health care transformation. Instead, take a critical look at where you can be more targeted and what you can reasonably accomplish within a year.

Organizations can assess how well they’re doing on each communication imperative by completing our red flag audits. The red flag audits are tailored to physician leaders and communication staff to reflect their unique roles.

The physician leader audits help assess the effectiveness of the overall communication strategy, and can help guide leaders in focusing communication staff efforts on high opportunity areas. The communication staff audits serve as a checklist, detailing the operational steps to build and execute an effective communication strategy.

Ready to start improving your communication strategy? Our communication Red Flag Audits are a good place to start.
About the Physician Executive Council

This piece is published by a research membership dedicated to supporting the CMO and team with best demonstrated practices, insights, tools, expert consultations, and networking opportunities.

We provide expert guidance to our members as they build an effective physician leadership team, engage the medical staff, and minimize clinical variation.

To learn more and access additional resources, visit:
» advisory.com/physicianexecutivecouncil

Additional Resources

Survey Solutions: Physician Engagement
Helps organizations develop and execute a data-driven physician relations strategy by uniting a dynamic survey construct reflective of today’s market, decades of Advisory Board physician expertise, and our proven Dedicated Advisor model in a unique partnership offering.

» advisory.com/solutions/survey-solutions

Crimson Continuum of Care
Performance technology initiative that helps hospitals manage physician performance to improve inpatient quality and cost per case.

» advisory.com/crimson

Southwind
Helps hospitals and health systems achieve full medical staff integration through physician practice management and consulting services addressing physician employment, physician practice acquisition, clinical integration, and alternative models of physician alignment.

» advisory.com/southwind

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Access and download all resources by visiting: advisory.com/pec/communicationtoolkit

Sources

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