

How to design effective communications: What has OES learned?

The United States government sends hundreds of millions of letters and emails to its citizens every year. These communications serve as a critical touchpoint by which citizens engage with our government programs and impact outcomes such as health insurance coverage, education enrollment and financing, tax compliance and benefits take-up, retirement security, and employment. Designing effective communications is therefore vital to ensuring that our government programs reach the people they are intended to serve.

[The Office of Evaluation Sciences \(OES\)](#) is an interdisciplinary team of experts within the Federal government, housed at the General Services Administration (GSA), that translates evidence-based insights into concrete recommendations for improving government and tests to learn what works. Since 2015, OES has completed more than 50 communication-specific interventions and evaluations with more than a dozen Federal agencies. Here's what these tests have revealed about how to design effective communications:

Keep it simple

1. **Include only the most essential items.** A collaboration with the Department of Defense (DOD) found that shorter emails promoted higher subscription rates and website visits to an electronic newsletter.¹ A collaboration with the Small Business Administration Learning Center found that simplifying the enrollment form increased course continuation rates.²
2. **Prioritize key information.** A collaboration with the Department of the Treasury found that a letter to delinquent borrowers that highlighted key information about online debt repayment in headings, text boxes, and bold text increased use of online payments but did not affect overall payment rates.³
3. **Provide step-by-step instructions.** A collaboration with the Department of Health and Human Services Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology found that adding clear action steps to an email encouraging patients to activate the patient portal component of the health care system's electronic health records marginally increased patient portal activation.⁴

Make it easy

1. **Provide actionable information.** A collaboration with GSA Public Buildings Service (PBS) found that, compared to a business-as-usual email, a simplified email with an embedded calendar reminder and action link increased the response rate to a workplace survey.⁵
2. **Prompt active choices.** A collaboration with the DOD found that emails framing the decision to subscribe to an electronic newsletter as an active choice (i.e. "Yes, I want to take advantage of the eNewsletter benefits" vs. "No, I prefer not to stay in the loop") increased subscription rates and website visits.⁶ In another collaboration, an email that presented Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) enrollment as an active choice nearly doubled enrollment relative to no email.⁷ And, presenting TSP enrollment as an active choice versus an opt-in choice during on-base in-processing increased enrollment by 6-7%.⁸

¹ Increasing Newsletter Subscription Rates of Active Duty Servicemembers, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/onesource-subscription/>

² Increasing Enrollment in the Small Business Administration's Learning Center, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/learning-center-enrollment/>

³ Increasing Debt Repayment by Delinquent Lenders, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/increasing-debt-repayment/>

⁴ Increasing Patient Use of Health IT, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/patient-health-it/>

⁵ Increasing Satisfaction Survey Response Rate from Federal Tenants - Calendar Invite, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/tenant-satisfaction-survey-calendar-invite/>

⁶ Increasing Newsletter Subscription Rates of Active Duty Servicemembers, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/onesource-subscription/>

⁷ Increasing Online TSP Enrollment by Servicemembers, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/online-tsp-enrollment/>

⁸ Increasing TSP Enrollment Rates through Active Choice, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/active-choice-tsp/>

3. **Make the recommended choice the easy choice.** A collaboration with the Treasury found that letters that provided investors with a default call-in time to discuss account options resulted in a 2.37% increase in call-in rates.⁹ A collaboration with the Office of Personnel Management found that including demographic information by default, in combination with simplified language, increased voluntary submission of demographic information by job seekers on USAJOBS by 19%.¹⁰ A collaboration with GSA found that making double-sided rather than single-sided printing the default significantly increased double-sided printing and lowered office-wide printing costs.¹¹

Make it personal

1. **Tailor to specific needs.** A collaboration with the Department of Education found that, among people who were eligible in the prior year for Pell Grants, messages that focused on the Pell Grant were more effective than messages describing financial aid more generally.¹²
2. **Provide personalized information.** In a collaboration with the Department of Education Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA), including student loan borrowers' actual monthly payment increase rather than the average monthly payment increase in an email reminding them to complete their annual Income-Driven Repayment (IDR) recertification led to a 2.64% higher recertification rate.¹³
3. **Offer individualized feedback and peer comparisons.** A collaboration with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Center for Program Integrity found that giving high volume prescribers feedback that their prescribing was extremely high relative to their peers reduced prescription volume and improved guideline conformity of prescription fills in Medicare Part D.¹⁴

Make it timely

1. **Learn when people are most responsive.** Collaborations with GSA PBS found that emails sent at lunchtime on Tuesdays and Wednesdays generated higher open and click rates to a survey.^{15,16} Note that the optimal timing may vary based on the audience, delivery mode, and intended response.
2. **Give people ample time and opportunities to respond.** A collaboration with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) found that reminders sent early in the tax season increased tax filing compliance and Earned Income Tax Credit payments.¹⁷ A collaboration with the Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service found that rolling verification for free or reduced-price school lunches increased response rates in three districts but decreased response rates in one.¹⁸
3. **Highlight deadlines.** In a collaboration with Department of Education FSA, including a deadline marginally increased the response rate to an email reminding student loan borrowers to complete their annual IDR recertification.¹⁹ A collaboration with HHS found that emails encouraging Federal Health Insurance Marketplace enrollment that framed the time until the deadline in hours versus days (i.e., 72 hours vs. 3 days) led to higher open and click rates but did not reliably impact enrollment.²⁰

⁹ Encouraging Account Transfers by Securities Holders, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/securities-account-transfers/>

¹⁰ Increasing Voluntary Submission of Demographics Information with USAJOBS Applications, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/USAJOBS-demographics/>

¹¹ Increasing Duplex Printing Among Federal Workforce, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/duplex-printing/>

¹² Increasing FAFSA Renewal Rates, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/increasing-fafsa-renewal-rates/>

¹³ Increasing IDR Re-certification Among Student Borrowers, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/idr-re-certification/>

¹⁴ Reducing Overprescribing of Quetiapine in Medicare Part D, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/quetiapine-prescribing/>

¹⁵ Increasing Satisfaction Survey Response Rate from Federal Tenants - Time of Day, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/tenant-satisfaction-survey-time-of-day/>

¹⁶ Increasing Satisfaction Survey Response Rate from Federal Tenants - Subject Lines and Day of Week, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/tenant-satisfaction-survey-subject-lines/>

¹⁷ Increasing Tax Filing Among Lower-Income Individuals, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/eitc-filing/>

¹⁸ National School Lunch Program Eligibility Verification, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/nslp-rolling-verification/>

¹⁹ Increasing IDR Re-certification Among Student Borrowers, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/idr-re-certification/>

²⁰ Increasing Health Insurance Enrollment Among Uninsured Americans, <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/health-insurance-enrollment-1/>