

OES Evidence Brief: Designing effective health communications

Responding to the COVID-19 epidemic has made it more important than ever for the government to design effective health communications. [The Office of Evaluation Sciences](#) (OES) is a team of experts within the Federal government, housed at the General Services Administration (GSA), that translates behavioral insights into recommendations for improving government and tests what works. Since 2015, OES has completed 50 tests related to communications and 24 tests specific to health communications. Here's what these collaborations have revealed about how to design more effective health communications:

Keep it simple

Present information clearly and simply. A collaboration with Health and Human Services (HHS)'s Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) found that adding clear and simple 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.¹

Make it easy

Help people to make an action plan. A collaboration with HHS's Federal Health Insurance Marketplace (FHIM) found that sending letters with action language and planning prompts to people who had registered for a HealthCare.gov user account but not yet enrolled in an insurance plan increased enrollment by 7.15%.²

Make it personal

Deliver communications through a trusted source. A collaboration with HHS's Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) and Inova Health System found that personalized reminders signed by the patient's primary care doctor stating that patient-entered data would be discussed at the patient's next office visit increased the likelihood that patients would enter health data by 3.1 percentage points relative to no reminder, but generic reminders did not reliably affect patient data entry.³

Provide personalized feedback and peer comparisons. A collaboration with HHS's Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services' (CMS) Center for Program Integrity (CPI) found that giving high prescribers feedback on how their prescribing compared to that of their peers reduced prescription volume and improved guideline conformity of prescription fills in Medicare Part D.⁴

Make it timely

Provide timely reminders. A collaboration with HHS's CMS and the National Vaccine Program Office (NVPO) found that timely reminders increased flu vaccination rates by 0.59 percentage points.⁵ A collaboration with HHS and the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) found that vaccine reminders sent at the beginning of the flu season increased vaccination rates, but reminders sent later in the flu season did not.⁶

Highlight deadlines. A collaboration with HHS found that emails encouraging enrollment in the Federal Health Insurance Marketplace that framed the time until a deadline in hours (i.e., 72 hours) versus days (i.e., 3 days) led to higher open and click rates but did not reliably impact enrollment.⁷

¹ <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/patient-health-it/>

² <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/health-insurance-enrollment-2/>

³ <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/patient-health-data-patient-reminders/>

⁴ <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/quetiapine-prescribing/>

⁵ <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/medicare-flu-vaccine-uptake/>

⁶ <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/increasing-vaccine-uptake-among-seniors/>

⁷ <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/health-insurance-enrollment-1/>