

State Health Reform Assistance Network

Charting the Road to Coverage

TIP SHEET
November 2012

Top 10 Best Practices for State Health Reform Websites

As states work to implement the Affordable Care Act (ACA), one of the many challenges they have is explaining Affordable Care Act provisions to consumers. Some states have taken a very proactive approach to educating the public, which includes developing consumer-friendly websites to educate users about health reform. As part of the State Health Reform Assistance Network (State Network) Forum One Communications and GMMB have helped three states with such websites. From this experience, we have compiled this collection of helpful tips for states to consider in designing health reform websites for consumers.

1. **Create Audience Specific Pages.** The ACA impacts different groups of people in specific ways. The design should reflect this fact by using audience as a primary organizing principle for content. By including global navigation links to audience-specific pages (e.g. Young Adults), you will allow users to quickly find information that's relevant to them.
2. **Show Healthy People.** Photography of a wide range of healthy people across your relevant demographics invites user engagement with the content and makes people feel more at ease. In our testing with real users, photography of people in a clinical setting did not resonate as well as photography of people who were happy and healthy doing everyday things.
3. **Ensure Mobile Accessibility.** Consumers will access your site using screens of different sizes and resolutions. Your site needs to work just as well for a user on a smartphone as it does for a user on desktop computer. Responsive Design is a web development approach that uses code to “ask” the browser of the person looking at your site about the screen size, number of colors, and orientation (portrait or landscape) of the display. Your site can then deliver styles and a layout tailored to any screen size.
4. **Define Tricky Terms.** Because health care content will always have to include some unfamiliar terms, provide a glossary, FAQ, and other contextual help content where appropriate so users can find answers to their questions as they go along. Also, try to keep the reading level at or below 8th grade level.
5. **Earn Your Users' Trust.** Clearly indicate who is behind this site (often on an “About” page and/or the footer). Consumers don't bring a lot of trust to a discussion about health care coverage, so it's important to let them know that this is an unbiased, not-for-profit resource with no hidden agendas.
6. **Practice Storytelling.** Users can often respond to and better comprehend a complex topic through storytelling. Rather than explaining concepts in the abstract alone, share stories and examples of what reform means for residents. Provide interesting facts about how residents in your state are benefitting from provisions in the act.
7. **Make Content Scannable.** Follow best practices for users reading content on the web. This includes breaking content into small digestible paragraphs, using headers and sub-headers with different styles to help users scan the page, and using bulleted lists and tables where appropriate. Remember that users are often impatient and move quickly through the site, clicking on any keyword or link they see. They often do not take time to read instructions or text that is overly general or flowery. Your goal should be to provide topline information users need to know without overwhelming them with long paragraphs of dense content.

ABOUT STATE NETWORK

State Health Reform Assistance Network, a program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, provides in-depth technical support to states to maximize coverage gains as they implement key provisions of the Affordable Care Act. The program is managed by the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. For more information, visit www.statenetwork.org.

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8. **Be Available and Responsive.** The health reform law is complex, and you won't be able to anticipate all questions for all users in advance. Create a contact form or email address for people to contact you with questions or comments, and ensure that you have staff actively monitor and respond to these inquiries.
9. **Keep in Touch.** At a minimum, collect email addresses through a subscription form so you can notify people of updates and new information as it is available. You should also consider using Twitter as another tool for information dissemination.
10. **Use a Content Management System.** Since content will change and new content will be produced for the site over time, you'll want site updates to be easily managed by non-technical staff. One benefit of a content management system is that it will allow your content authors to edit and/or publish content in the system without having to understand web programming languages.