

# The Benefits of Humor

## 5 Tips to Enliven Your Open Enrollment Communication

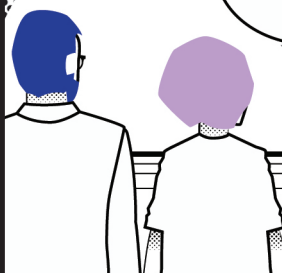
BY MIKE SHEPHERD AND SUSAN FAZO,  
WILLIS TOWERS WATSON

TWO HR  
PROFESSIONALS  
WALK INTO A BAR.

THEY TALK A LITTLE  
SHOP WHILE THEY  
WAIT FOR SERVICE.

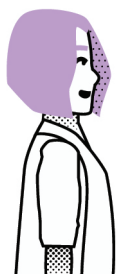


WHAT CAN  
I GET YOU?



I'LL HAVE A  
LITE BEER

LISA SAYS.



I'D LIKE  
YOUR BEST  
CHAMPAGNE

LENNY SAYS.



LET ME GUESS, YOU'RE IN  
THE HIGH-DEDUCTIBLE PLAN  
AND HE'S IN THE PPO

(THE ENTIRE BAR  
ERUPTS IN LAUGHTER.)



OK, WE TRIED.

THAT PARTICULAR JOKE ASIDE, FOLLOWING ARE A FEW TIPS TO HELP YOU ADD SOME SPARK AND  
INTEREST TO ENGAGE AND MOTIVATE YOUR EMPLOYEES DURING OPEN ENROLLMENT.

# The Benefits of Humor

## TIP 1:

### Benefits Can Be Funny

If you've ever faced the daunting task of developing an engaging enrollment guide or making a benefits meeting come to life, chances are you've tried to weave in a little humor to lighten up all that technical detail. But it's not easy.

But even if you don't sprinkle in hysterical PPO vs. HDHP jokes, there's much you can do to interject some humor and create effective communications for open enrollment.

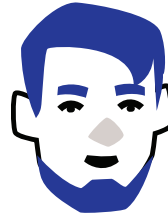
Let's see how Lenny and Lisa are doing back at the bar. By now, they've made a few friends, and they're sharing everything they know about open enrollment! (See "Lenny and Lisa Commiserate.")

Both HR professionals are coming from different places, with different points of view. But they agree that there's room for improvement in their open enrollment communications strategy.

Whether you find yourself more in Lenny's column or Lisa's, the key is to shape your strategy based on a tone and style that's a good match with the people you want to engage. Doing that may mean changing the conversation with your employees.

## Lenny and Lisa Commiserate

### Stuff Lenny Says



Our employees think open enrollment is a really big deal.

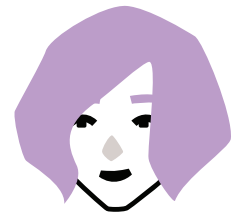
If we don't send out a detailed enrollment guide, we'll get tons of employee appeals.

We offer a lot of benefits to choose from and our employees love all the options.

Every year we explain to employees that health-care costs are a shared responsibility.

A lot of our planning is for face-to-face enrollment meetings led by our HR team.

### Stuff Lisa Says



Our employees wish that open enrollment would go away.

If we send out anything more than four pages, our employees throw it in the trash.

Our employees don't know what we offer, why we offer it or how to choose it.

We're self-insured but our employees think our medical carrier pays our health-care claims.

Our employees want self-service, especially if it's on their mobile phone.

## If You Don't Believe Us, Maybe You'll Believe Harvard?

In a *Harvard Business Review* article, Alison Beard wrote:

The problem, most would say, is that humor is subjective: What you find amusing or side-splittingly hilarious, Mary in marketing and Amir in accounting most certainly do not. But the authors of two recent books on the subject — *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*, and *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* — disagree. They believe that there's a formula for what makes all people laugh.

But as a manager [or communicator], you might be able to slip a joke into a speech or a presentation from time to time, but you're certainly not going to walk around the office lobbing one-liners like Bob Hope, cursing like Richard Pryor or slinging insults like Ricky Gervais.

Recent research shows that although employees admire and feel more motivated by leaders who use humor effectively, they have less respect for those who try to be funny and fail or who make fun of themselves.

Beard offers some tips:

- It's not whether or not you're funny, it's what kind of funny you are. Be honest and authentic.
- If you can't be "ha-ha" funny, at least be "aha!" funny. Cleverness is sometimes good enough.
- Don't be afraid to chuckle at yourself. It signals everything is okay.
- Laughter is disarming. Poke fun at the stuff everyone's worried about.

*Excerpted from "Leading with Humor" by Alison Beard (May 2014). Reprinted with permission by Harvard Business Review.*

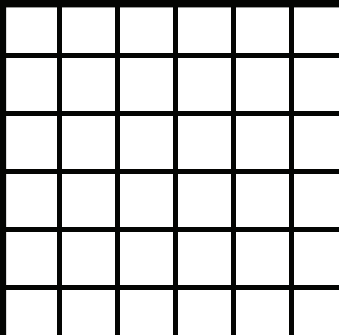
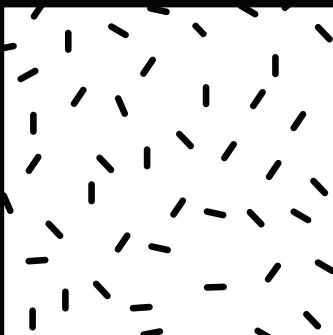
Humor can play an important role, to set a “you can do this!” tone and grab attention. But it’s also a good idea to remember that choosing benefits is an important financial decision that most people don’t take too lightly. It’s all about balance. How you shape the conversation should be as unique as your organization and your people.

## TIP 2:

### Lather, Rinse, *Don’t Repeat*

Even though open enrollment happens every year, it doesn’t mean you have to do the same thing every time. It can be helpful to measure your previous communication strategy and delivery efforts based on the latest information you have about your workforce. Freshness can be inviting and says “Read me!” to your employees.

- **Is This Thing On?** Are your employees even paying any attention to this benefits stuff? With many organizations offering a passive enrollment each year and allowing employees to skip the process entirely just keeping what they have, it’s understandable that some may have tuned out altogether. *Sound familiar, Lisa?*
- **#OpenEnrollment.** Are your employees (and their benefits-eligible family members) more connected online and via mobile technology than they were the last time you refreshed your engagement strategy? (Hint: They are.) What new channels can you open to meet your people where they are now? Could a mobile engagement strategy help? *Lenny, can you hear me now?*
- **It’s Not Just What, It’s Why.** Are you devoting enough energy and content to explaining why your organization offers the benefits you’re writing about? Employees need to understand the context for all the details you communicate, and it’s even better if they can see how those details fit into a broader rewards or employee value proposition framework. *Break it down for them, Lisa!*



- **Clear as Mud.** Are you sharing too much detail at one time? There’s definitely a place for all those comprehensive side-by-side tables of benefits minutiae, with those all-important footnotes. Just maybe not in a 32-page enrollment guide that you mail to homes — especially if your employees have access to easier-to-use online benefits tools (which they probably like better). *Aw, don’t take it personally, Lenny! The times, they are a changin’.* (With apologies to Bob Dylan.)

- **Ahem ... Aren’t You Forgetting Someone?**

Often, the primary benefits decision makers are spouses and partners. And some of them will want to compare dependent benefits your organization offers with the employee benefits their own employers offer. Be sure your strategy includes outreach with these folks in mind. *We know, Lisa, four pages or fewer!*

## TIP 3:

### Goals are Good

Even if you just want to take small steps in how you change your approach to open enrollment communication, it helps to have a goal to work toward and to be specific about what you want to achieve.

Here are questions to consider:

- Is it a status-quo benefits year when not much is changing, or are there new program details to explain?
- Are enrollment patterns right where you want them to be across the plans you offer, or are many of your employees over-insured in higher-cost plans that include benefits that go unused?
- If you offer an HSA-based health plan, are employees making the most of the HSA’s many tax advantages, or is HSA participation lower than you’d like?
- Do your employees know how to make informed enrollment decisions, or is it more of a guessing game that involves random advice from co-workers — or perhaps astrologers?
- Are you committed to the same media you’ve used in the past, or is it time to try something new?
- The answers to those questions can help you shape and tailor your goals for open enrollment. Try to keep those goals clear, measurable and realistic. (See Figure 1: Clear, Measurable and Realistic Goals.)

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## TIP 4:

### Say Goodbye to the Phone Book

If you remember phone books, this tip is for you. If you don't remember them, here's the scoop: They were gigantic, printed volumes of every possible name and phone number in the surrounding area that anybody might (or might not) ever want to know. The thud of their arrival on the doorstep could set off the Richter scale, or at least a couple of car alarms. And not just once. Every year. Year after year. (And, yes, while using phone books, we also walked miles to school in driving blizzards!)

In the phone companies' defense, the phone book, for a long time, was the only way to distribute information they thought everyone should have, even though only some people ever used them. Fair enough.

So, we have to ask: Is your current enrollment guide a little bit like the old phone book? Too many pages? In a format few people value? Every year? Maybe it never even makes it into the house? (Or the email inbox.) You can see it getting soggy in the rain, can't you?

It's sad, especially because it's a lot of work. But it doesn't have to end this way for our poor enrollment guide. (See "Back at the Bar.")

## Back at the Bar

### Recall Lenny's concern:



If we don't send out a detailed enrollment guide, we'll get tons of employee appeals

**Fair enough.** It's true that employees need information to make informed decisions during open enrollment. But an overly detailed enrollment guide that disengages your employees could lead to an appeal anyway, based on the belief that the document is impossible to understand.

Really, isn't the goal to help employees "get" this stuff and see the value you're offering with the choices, tools and support you provide? If you're making decisions about content with potential appeals in mind, you might be missing out on a bigger engagement opportunity. But at least your legal team will be happy, right?

### FIGURE 1: Clear, Measurable and Realistic Goals

"I want every employee to read my enrollment guide and love it"

**Clear?** Yes  
**Measurable?** Maybe  
**Realistic?** Well, at least it was clear!

"I want 80% or more of our employees to open the digital version of this year's enrollment guide."

**Clear?** Yes  
**Measurable?** Yes  
**Realistic?** Yes (especially since nobody has to love it this time)

"I want to test the viability of SMS texting as an effective communication channel for our remote employees."

**Clear?** Yes  
**Measurable?** Yes  
**Realistic?** Yes, with an effective vendor partner and a solid strategy.

## TIP 5:

### Be a Storyteller

Even if your communication strategy doesn't include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat (and probably a bunch of others we're not hip enough to know about yet), we all know that people like to tell stories. They like to hear them too.

At its heart, storytelling is about sharing experiences, and the desire for shared experiences has never been stronger.

There's a great story to tell about open enrollment, especially if you can locate your organization's engaging narrative about benefits. It's probably hovering a few feet above all these detailed plan descriptions and

side-by-side comparison charts. Organizations that communicate effectively often establish thematic links between the benefits they offer and the employee experience they want to create. And the best organizations take it a step further by developing a narrative that links the employee experience to the organization's purpose and position in the market. Employees want to hear a specific narrative, and who better than you to create it?

***“We are now moving from an age of information to an age of experiences.”***

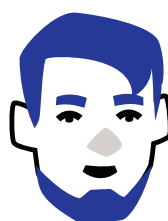
– Megan Summers, global head of production, Facebook

Consider these ideas, rooted in storytelling, as you plan ahead for your next round of open enrollment communications:

- **Set the stage.** Context is important, and employees are much likelier to stick with your narrative if you make it clear up front why it matters and what's in it for them to pay attention.
- **Use plain language.** Benefits details can be complicated. If the language you choose is overly formal and there's too much detail, you probably can count on a lot of employees tuning out early.
- **Know your audience(s).** Within the broad employee population you're trying to reach, there likely are different cohorts with different learning styles, different attention spans for benefits, and different communications needs. Acknowledge that up front and build a strategy that meets your people where they are and delivers information in the way they want — or are able — to hear.
- **Build in a few surprises.** When it comes to benefits, the word “surprise” might not seem like a good fit. After all, there's serious money attached to benefits programs, both for you and your employees. But that doesn't mean you can't do the unexpected. Whether content choices, a fresh graphic design, a new media channel or, best of all, a combination thereof, your “story” about benefits enrollment is sure to be more compelling if there's some element of your engagement approach that your employees don't see coming.

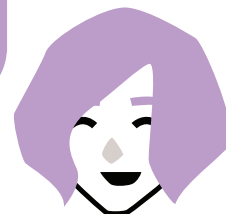
- **Remember the value of humor.** If we've learned nothing else from Lenny and Lisa, it's that authors of this article are brilliantly funny. We suspect you have or someone on your team has a sense of humor, too, so don't shy away from the chance to make somebody laugh about benefits. It's not such serious stuff.

And speaking of our favorite barflies, they finally did make it back to work. Here's their latest email exchange:



Wanna grab a quick bite or drink after work?

Wish I could.  
But I'm totally engrossed  
in this enrollment guide.



Now, *that's* funny. **ws**

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