

Reach Your Audience – The Value of Plain Communication

by Bran LeFae

In our high tech world, a website has become a critical component to any successful marketing plan for the healthcare practitioner. Just like anything else in marketing, a website is only as good as the communication it contains. Creating a website that reaches and engages your audience can be challenging for many reasons. Among others, did you know that in the United States the average reading level is only eighth grade? Health care literacy levels are low as well. How can you reach across these barriers to help your patients be empowered in their healthcare choices?

Plain language communication is an approach that can help. It is communication that is easily understood the first time it is read or heard. Instead of “dumbing down” what you're trying to get across, plain language tools help you convey important information while communicating in an engaging, understandable way. Plain language provides a toolkit that hones communication so it is logical and easy to read. It does this in part by using shorter sentences, every day words and speaking in the active voice to engage the audience. Even the most complex material can be made more comprehensible using this approach.

Within the plain language toolkit are several valuable techniques. The approach takes into account both the visual aspect of the material and the content. For example, is there enough white space around the words? Too much content and not enough white space makes material harder to read. When communicating, are you using words that people encounter every day, or do they have to learn a specialized vocabulary in order to understand what you're saying? Using every day words helps people feel that your content is approachable. Another important aspect is writing in a way that's engaging to the audience. Using active voice keeps the reader or listener connected to what you're saying. Finally, is your content organized logically and are you avoiding unnecessary detail? Staying focused on the point and only including relevant information is important. Too much detail and people begin to lose the impact of what you're saying.

These are only a few of the techniques that plain language writers and editors use to create approachable content that reaches across literacy barriers to engage your audience. When you are new to this approach, start by writing as you normally would. Then use the plain language guidelines to refine your work. Plain language writing and editing is a specific skill – but one well worth developing in order to reach your audience. Luckily, many resources exist online if you want to pursue this on your own, and plain language editors and writers are also available to help you create and refine your educational material. Taking the time to communicate on your website and other promotional materials in a way that really engages your audience is an investment worth your time. Clear communication will continue to help your practice grow and prosper by empowering your patients in their healthcare decisions.