



As published in *Meat & Deli Retailer*, June/July 2006

IMPROVING VALUE: 8 TIPS FOR ENHANCING EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

By Karen Gustin, LLIF, Ameritas Group Dental and Eye Care

Employee benefits are one of the top 10 issues on the minds of business leaders across the country. Their concerns revolve around balancing costs while providing the right mix of benefits to retain and attract quality employees and professionals.

The solution for businesses is to develop a long-range approach to employee benefits and offer plans that best match employee needs, instead of waiting to react to insurance proposals and premiums at renewal time.

Consider the following strategies to help your business take control of benefits plans:

- **Develop a long-term strategy.** Many businesses think about employee benefits several months before renewal time. While this approach has worked in the past, today's benefits are fairly complex and require advance planning to find the right options that match employee needs.
- **Listen to employees' opinions.** Gather feedback on benefits from unbiased individuals in the organization, especially if employees work under a union contract. Listen to their suggestions and ask for help in prioritizing options. Avoid making promises in case you can't fulfill them.
- **Define the reason for offering benefits.** It's important to clearly understand why you provide employee benefits. For example, are specific benefits required by union contract or necessary to recruit and retain quality employees? The answers will indicate which options best match those considerations.
- **List critical benefit plan features.** Review current plan utilization trends and employee demographics. Look for large segments of workers with specific needs, such as individuals with young families, certain types of diseases or health conditions, or those nearing retirement age. Develop a list of critical features for each benefit option.
- **Interview insurance carriers to find a strategic partner.** Carriers have different areas of expertise and operational philosophies. Ask carriers for specific details on their experiences with plans and businesses of similar size and scope to yours, and for a history of premium increases. Identify carriers that want to partner with you in providing the best benefit options.
- **Explain benefit plan needs to your insurance broker.** To help your broker shop for the right mix of benefits, explain your benefit goals, insurance carrier preferences, and plan design requirements.

Note: If you wait until renewal time to identify carrier preferences, you may have less control over benefit options. Brokers may not have sufficient time to find the best carriers with the right plan design and premium.

- **Evaluate plans to find the best fit.** Carefully review the plan designs for the right match. Remember, you don't have to take the first proposal. If you find a carrier and plan you like, negotiate for specific features.
- **Communicate new benefits to employees, especially if there are changes from current plans.** When reviewing utilization trends and employee demographics, you may find unused features which could be exchanged for more pertinent services. Clearly communicate the reasons for these changes. Otherwise employees may think they're receiving a lower-quality plan.

After new benefits are introduced, track employee feedback. Regularly ask employees about their experiences with the plans and insurance carriers, and use this information to identify future benefit needs.

By taking a little time to develop an action plan, you can maximize your plan offerings and boost employee satisfaction with the benefits you provide them.

Karen M. Gustin, LLIF, is vice president-group marketing and managed care for Ameritas Group Dental and Eye Care in Lincoln, Nebraska. Her tenure with Ameritas Group spans 23 years. She's involved with the National Association of Dental Plans (NADP), serving on the foundation board and chairing the Statistical Task Force.