



## HEALTHCARE +

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# Improving physician **engagement** and **satisfaction.**

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**Physician burnout is on the rise. Across the country, doctors' ability to practice medicine and care for their patients is increasingly impacted by ongoing government regulations and administrative requirements. As physician burnout increases, patient care and volumes are negatively impacted, which, in turn, affects revenue, reputation, and experience.**

A consistent physician engagement and communications strategy helps mitigate the levels of burnout and dissatisfaction within an organization and increases the emotional connection between a health system/medical group and its providers.

## AN INDUSTRY-WIDE PERSPECTIVE

Throughout the health industry, physician engagement is widely recognized as a key measurement of the commitment and professional satisfaction of a medical staff. Typically, physician engagement is directly impacted by three main areas: organizational administration, physician/medical group culture, and physician leadership.

Establishing a consistent physician engagement and communications strategy helps organizations create trusted relationships between physicians and their administrative and physician leadership. These positive relationships have been proven industry-wide to increase physician referrals and productivity.

An investment in a physician engagement program will likely accomplish a better ROI than traditional consumer-facing mass media marketing efforts and is expected to have a longer lifespan of reach, frequency, and awareness among target audiences.

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## PHYSICIAN ENGAGEMENT = INCREASED SATISFACTION + SUCCESS

Physician engagement strategies are vital for a health system’s success. A highly engaged physician equates to quality patient care, lower costs, increased efficiency, and improved patient safety. Perhaps just as important, physician engagement strategies have been shown to deliver higher levels of physician satisfaction, impacting employment retention/recruitment rates.

Gallup surveys have reported an estimated 26 percent increase in productivity for engaged physicians over disengaged physicians.<sup>1</sup> For health systems and medical groups that typically operate on extremely tight operational margins, this is an area too important to be ignored.

## PERCEIVED CHALLENGES

In a recent interview, Doug Apple, MD, Chief Clinical Officer – Atlantic Group, Bon Secours Mercy Health System, talks about addressing potential obstacles in defining physician engagement and satisfaction.

“Defining satisfaction for physicians is actually quite a challenge,” says Dr. Apple. “There’s not one simple metric to use. But we can do things that look at how people are engaged. You can do simple surveys to be able to understand how many of your staff are actually responding to the surveys. What are they saying in the surveys? Not just filling out the bubble sheet, but what are the free-text comments? And then, making sure that you’re communicating, not only from what you get from those surveys, but what you’re doing about them, and also being transparent as to what you can do or what you can’t do right now, because there’s so much change going on. How are we going to focus and partner together to make sure we actually move forward?”

**1** According to Advisory Board research, one significant cause of physician disconnect is centered around group decision-making and conflict with administrative decisions. Maintaining positive physician engagement requires creating the right balance between making quick, centralized decisions and taking the time to effectively build broad levels of physician support and buy-in, while consistently communicating “the why” to those affected. Anecdotally,

Dr. Apple has experienced challenges in this regard in many instances. “I’ve had physicians tell me it wasn’t so much that a decision was made, it was understanding why or how they came to a decision, and then being informed on that,” he explains.

He continues, “While we spent most of the time thinking that we had to engage every physician, in reality, that wasn’t the case. It was really that people wanted to understand, ‘What is the problem? What are you doing about it? And thank you for letting me know. And, if I have questions, who do I go to?’ It was vital for us to create an empowerment for people to know what’s happening, as well as to become engaged, if it was a certain topic that they were interested in.”

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**2** A second challenge is to educate executive leadership to gain their approval to shift a portion of marketing dollars away from consumer-focused efforts. While consumer perception and choice continue to be important within the health/wellness industry, physicians are still the number one driving force behind where patients choose to receive care. Simply put, engaged physicians are loyal physicians.

**3** A third challenge is that a physician audience will be hesitant to embrace any effort that does not seem to be sincere or encouraging of two-way communication. It is important to address this concern through c-suite support and buy-in at the initial launch of any program.

## GOALS + OBJECTIVES

The ultimate goal of physician engagement initiatives is to show an increase in reported levels of engagement and satisfaction from physicians, which leads to increased support of system initiatives and, ultimately, increased referrals.

**To measure the success of efforts, it’s important to develop tactics that specifically deliver noticeable increases in the following areas:**

- Clear and efficient communication channels for two-way engagement
- Trust, understanding, and respect among, and for, physicians
- Trust in physician leaders to champion these efforts within their areas of influence

## NECESSARY RESEARCH + DATA

In order to develop an effective physician engagement program, baseline research is necessary to determine areas for improvement and impact.

**Specifically, feedback is necessary to help determine current perceptions and levels of:**

- Physician involvement in decision-making
- Trust between physicians and administrative leadership
- Physician satisfaction and commitment to the organization
- Satisfaction with physician leadership
- Satisfaction with internal communications

To help gather this data, it is recommended that anonymous surveys be distributed to both employed and non-employed physicians (and possibly mid-level and advanced practice providers, as appropriate) to solicit their opinions and feedback. In an effort to enhance transparency within the organization, initial results should be shared with all physicians.

## SUGGESTED TACTICS + RECOMMENDATIONS

It is vitally important that all tactics keep an underlying focus of developing clear and efficient two-way communication channels with physicians; building trust and respect with physicians; and helping to identify/develop physician leaders within the system.

**Possible tactics to consider include:**

- Form department-specific physician focus groups
- Email medical staff surveys (starting with employed physicians)
- Implement physician email guidelines to help prioritize internal communications
- Develop physician advisory board
- Produce monthly physician leadership blogs and video messages
- Launch a mobile physician communications site, e.g., a one-stop shop for all communications



True engagement welcomes and involves physicians in developing a shared vision for the organization, allowing them to become true partners in solving challenges and celebrating an organization's success.

## MEASUREMENTS OF SUCCESS

To measure overall effectiveness of any physician engagement campaign, it is recommended that organizations specifically track the following:

- Percentage of increase in physicians who indicate positive engagement
- Percentage of reduction in referral leakage in key specialties
- Percentage of increase in physicians responding to follow-up surveys

**Other key measurement points include increases in:**

- Satisfaction with the teamwork demonstrated among departmental staff
- Satisfaction with the overall performance of hospital administration
- Belief that patients are satisfied with the quality of care they receive
- Perceived usefulness of the continuing medical education offered
- Satisfaction with the performance of the nursing staff
- Belief that the organization cares about quality improvement
- Belief that the organization treats physicians with respect

Often, physician engagement efforts focus mainly on involving physicians in quality improvement and safety initiatives. While this is obviously important, physician engagement means so much more.

True engagement welcomes and involves physicians in developing a shared vision for the organization, allowing them to become true partners in solving challenges and celebrating an organization's success.

Engaged physicians are trusted partners and front-facing brand ambassadors; they should be able to confidently communicate an organization's promise to the community it serves. Effective communication helps prepare physicians to be better engaged and better prepared.

**Choosing a marketing and communications partner that has specific experience with physician communication programs and physician engagement initiatives is vital to succeeding in this highly complex area.**

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### Sources

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