A lot of people in the healthcare industry simply don’t “get it” when it comes to the way patients receive information. Some communications are technical and difficult to understand. The rest is written with total disregard for the audience it is intended for. Boring newsletters are deleted without ever being opened. Information that is intended to help patients stay healthy is disregarded because it’s buried in mounds of copy.

For Geisinger Health Plan, the question became: “How do we take the stuff that helps our members with decisions and make it direct and informative?” This question lit a fire for me. After joining Geisinger, I never wanted to send communications to members that they couldn’t do something with. Every letter that came across my desk, I wanted to make sure it was information I’d want to receive or that I’d want my family to receive. We wanted to not only be very clear, but helpful with every communication we sent to our members. Unfortunately, when I came on board, we didn’t have the flexibility to make that happen.
STARTING IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL STONE AGE

When I started here, developing communications consisted of writing documents in Word and then doing a mail merge to send them out or ordering letters from a difficult to use system. This system left us with little flexibility. Members told us they wanted to have the choice in how they received our communications. Some wanted print versions mailed to them, while others preferred electronic. We needed a system that would allow us to send communication electronically based on their preference, but in a way that was still secure. After all, we couldn’t send private health information over the internet.

We also wanted communication management software that would allow us to consolidate all of our documents and make editing a trivial process. Back then, there were a number of letters in the system that were signed by the previous Vice President of Customer Service, someone who no longer worked with the company. Each letter needed to be changed individually to: “Sincerely, Customer Service Team,” a process that seemed to go on for weeks. With the way we had structured our communications, we couldn’t do a simple mass edit. It had to happen manually on every individual document. We desperately needed a way to change our communications on the fly without consuming our entire day.

NARROWING DOWN THE SOLUTION

By the time I arrived at Geisinger, we had gathered a short list of possible communication management software providers. Right off the bat, some did not interpret communication preference well, so out the window they went. Once we had a pared down short list, we looked at the software, made a list of what we wanted to see happen and what features we were looking for. After each presentation, we took our list of must-haves, want-to-haves, and could-live-withouts, and checked off what each provider had to offer.

Based on our simple list of criteria, Quadient emerged as the perfect solution to our communication management problems. I was first impressed by the interactivity of the platform. The streamlined drag-and-drop text editor interface would make creating individual templates a breeze. They also offered an interface where we could set up templates for myself or other members of our team. Each of these letters would already include sections that could be adapted to an individual situation, along with sections that were locked down. Even better, users could pull from a pool of paragraphs that have been pre-approved by marketing and compliance.

ROLLING OUT

Completely restructuring the way we send out communications has not been easy. I spent weeks training with Quadient and got to sit with another company who was a year further into the process than we were. Their biggest advice? Do what Quadient’s professional services team tells you to do.

Templates don’t kill creativity. In fact, they free up more time to do your best work.

It’s not enough to communicate with your customers, you have to train them on how you will communicate with them.
It seems so simple, but too many organizations hire experts to help them turn around some aspect of their business and then blow past any evidence-based practices and do whatever they want. We were determined to follow everything Quadient told us to do, as closely as possible.

First, we were told we should start building templates to streamline our processes. We had to examine every single letter we sent and find common themes. Every communication has the business logo, our mailing address based on the department the letter originates from, a footer on the first page, a headline, etc. Once we had a general template, we could move on to each department and figure out how to make a few customized templates that would meet their needs.

My favorite part of the entire process was working independently with the experts at Quadient at every step of the way. I could attempt to create a template, but if it didn’t work the way I wanted it to, or if I ran into a stumbling block, I had the ability to call our contacts at Quadient for help or advice.

**TEMPLATES, TEMPLATES EVERYWHERE**

Creating templates was the biggest game-changer for us. We often think of templates as rigid structures that don’t allow us to communicate effectively. In reality, when a template is created properly, it can streamline everything. It also gives our internal team an opportunity to think differently about how they talk to our members.

We have some copy that we’re legally required to include. But for everything else, our teams are forced to think about the message of every communication they send and think about how it impacts our members’ daily lives. That’s why I have invested so much time into creating valuable templates for each department within our company. We’re training our members with consistently designed communication.

First, we have a template based on the intent of the letter. A letter that tells you about something is going to be structured and designed differently than the letter that asks you to do something. In the letter telling you about something, that key information is designed and brought out in a way where your eyes are drawn to it right away. There might be some supplemental information that you can read in the letter, but the crux of what you need will be readable in 10 seconds or less. You need to be able to pick it up, glance at it, and throw it away, and still have the information you need. Letters asking you to do something require more text to notify you of next steps in a way that draws attention.

Next, we have to think about our communications like a visual language. Both the “need to know” and “asks to do” letters need bullet points. In one case, it is a list of what we want our members to be aware of. In the other, bullet points are your next steps. The hope is that once you open several letters, you begin to recognize the visual language we are trying to convey. Any patient can glance at one of our letters and think, “I know what needs to happen now,” because they’ve been trained by the visual language.

Now that we are out of the initial phases, I am starting to focus on the fundamental changes to what we’re saying and why. We want to not only offer our members content based on how they want to receive it; we want to give them customized content based on their age, interests, family situations, or line of business. We want to offer quality content that can affect our members’ lives. Are you looking to lose weight? Here are articles about healthy eating and exercise. Are you interested in cooking? Here are some game day recipes you are sure to love. We want to change how our members view not only us, but healthcare as a whole.

**A WORD OF ADVICE**

The healthcare industry has an enormous amount of data at our disposal that we have never figured out what to do with. Personalization can go beyond having a person’s name appear on a letter. It can be about them, their interests, their concerns, and their experiences. Taking advantage of every bit of information you have to make communication that’s relevant to your customers will change their experience—and their perception of you.

If I could offer one piece of advice on revamping your communication strategy, it would be to get all departments involved early and make sure leadership is on board. The people who are responsible for customer communication need to understand why you are making changes, and how it will benefit your customers.

The sooner people buy-in, the sooner you can stop explaining the process to panicked managers and start enjoying the rewards of more effective, efficient communication. For Geisinger, that meant changing industry stereotypes. For your company, the power’s now in your hands.