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Engage Your Hard-to-Reach Populations:
A Guide for Health Plans

You have a great message. Now what?

Call it the Great Health Care Paradox:

Populations that are hardest to reach are often those who'd benefit most from the messages you're trying to send. Consider the 60 million

The 60 million Americans who live in rural areas are the least healthy overall.

Americans who live in rural areas. They are, on average, sicker, older, and poorer than their urban counterparts, have higher premature death rates, and rank lowest in health outcomes, according to County Health Rankings.

At the same time, more than 100 rural hospitals closed between 2013 and 2020—putting even more distance between rural Americans and the care they need.

Seniors are another prime example.

The average retired couple spends $300,000 on health care and medical expenses throughout their golden years, according to 2021 research from Fidelity Investments. That sky-high price tag makes affording health care the top stressor when employees think about retirement.

Problem is, connecting this group with resources that allow them to better manage their health—and do so less expensively—can be a struggle. Yes, seniors are ramping up their tech ownership and adoption, but they don't use web-enabled tech as intuitively as their younger peers. And many companies simply don't account for age-related access issues when designing health programs and tools.

So how do you actually connect the dots between hard-to-reach populations and health tools and services?

Trying to solve population-specific challenges with a one-size-fits-all solution isn't the answer. But there are some hard-won insights to be shared when it comes to connecting with traditionally hard-to-reach groups, whether the reason is cultural, technological, or economical.

Rest assured, with the right content strategy, your organization can not only reach and deeply engage these individuals, but empower them to act as well.

Here's your three-step plan.

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1 Know Where Your Audience Spends Their Time

You wouldn't deliver a speech without an audience.

Health messaging is no different. Before picking up a megaphone, health care organizations must spend the time to study the natural meeting spots and information hubs (both in real life and online) for hard-to-reach populations.

Case in point: Systemic racism, national protests, and higher COVID-19 risks have hit Black communities hard. But data shows that Black communities are also woefully under-resourced and underrepresented in mental health care.

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Enter the Confess Project Barber Coalition, a nonprofit that has trained more than 200 barbers to be mental health advocates for their communities. The approach, though innovative, isn't entirely novel: A 2018 study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that pharmacist-led pro-grams in barbershops significantly lowered high blood pres-sure in Black men. And a 12-month follow-up study found that positive impact was sustained long after the pharma-cists had cleared out of the barbershops.

For the LGBT+ community, health care can be fraught and frustrating. LGBT+ people are likely to have a usual source of care, but according to a 2021 Kaiser Family Foundation analysis, they're more likely to report a range of negative provider experiences, including having their concerns dismissed or being blamed for their health problems.

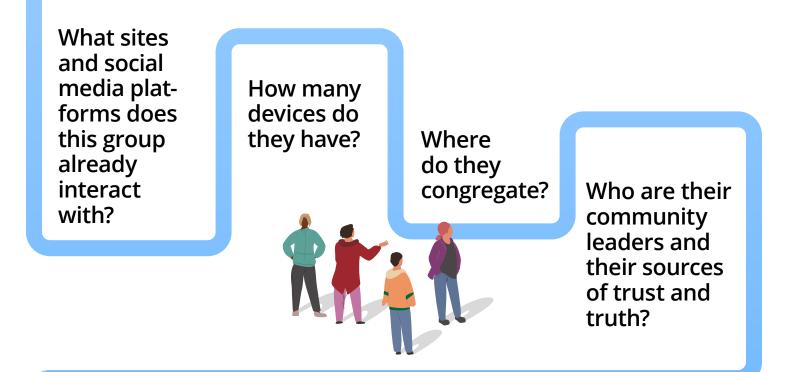Reaching this population through the provider isn't always the best tactic—even when talking about prescrip-tion medications. The LGBT+ health care startup Folx instead doubled down on virtual health visits and mail-order hormone therapies. And to spare patients from piecing together insights and anecdotes from peers, the company created The Library, a robust collection of vetted health information on everything from PrEP and HIV prevention to how to apply estrogen patches.

Black communities are woefully under–resourced in mental health care.

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It's content the founder has said "bridge[s] the gap from free-for-all subreddits, where you can get all *kinds* of information about what you can do, to the Mayo Clinic website, where you go if you want to go read medical literature."
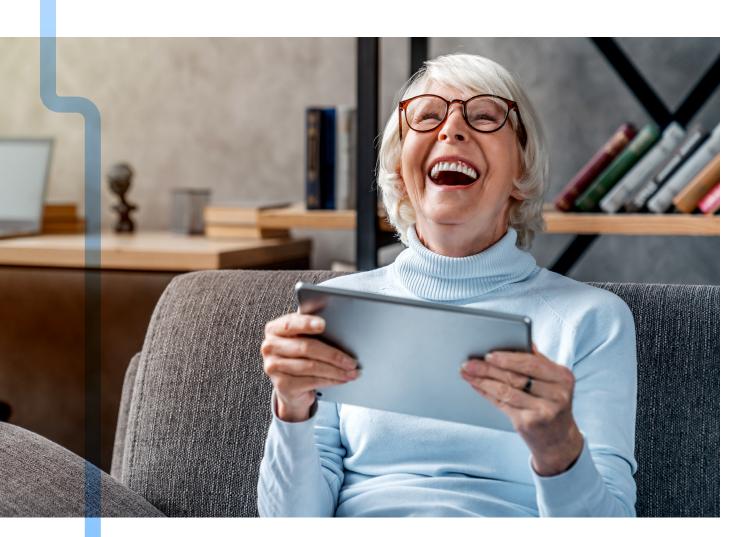
Many health care organizations have a trove of data about how people engage with and interact with their brand. But keep in mind that those insights are centered on the people you're already reaching.

To reach a larger crowd, think beyond health care to population data.

What sites and social media platforms does this group already interact with?

How many devices do they have?

Where do they congregate?

Who are their community leaders and their sources of trust and truth?

Building a flashy app for older seniors won't matter much if most don't know how to navigate the app store. Ditto trying to reach rural Americans mainly through doctor's office waiting rooms. But if you can figure out where your target audience is, you're halfway there.

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2 Understand Exactly What Your Audience Needs

You wouldn't spend a dinner party talking exclusively about yourself.

The same holds true for health care: Ask questions and get to know your audience if you want to really fuel a meaningful conversation.

That upfront work can spare you from eye-rolling stereotypes that turn off your target audience. Again, take seniors. In an AARP study on online marketing images, researchers

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found that 7 in 10 images of adults over 50 show them as removed from the world, either alone, with a partner, or with a health care professional.

They're "most often shown as dependent and seated with others who are 'taking care' of them," the study noted. But that portrayal is in stark contrast to the life seniors want to live—full of energy, curiosity, and social connections.

Portraying seniors as feeble and dependent doesn't only elicit eye rolls from this hard-to-reach population, it can backfire. Research has shown that such cultural stereotypes negatively "influence decisions to engage in cognitive and physical activity, the ability to recover from disease, and ultimately the length and quality of life," researchers concluded.

Eighty-three percent of health initiatives that include a strategy to build trust and

83% of health initiatives that include a strategy to build trust and respect have higher participant retention.

respect had higher participant retention than programs without such a strategy (48%), according to a study in *The American Journal of Public Health.* In other words, such ham-fisted outreach isn't just ignored—it can actually be detrimental to the very people it's trying to reach.

Cultural awareness is just one piece of the complicated but essential task of understanding the target population. Social determinants of health (SDOH)—including employment

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status, physical and mental health, racial and gender identity, and geographic location—also shape an individual's access to health services and health care education.

How big is the impact of SDOH? Research suggests that medical care may account for only 10 to 20 percent of health outcomes, with the rest attributed to environmental, demographic, and socioeconomic factors.

These many overlapping, amplifying factors make it imperative that target populations are seen as the multifaceted people they are. Older people who live in poorer areas are more likely to experience multiple comorbidities, and this tends to occur 10 to 15 years earlier compared to people who live in affluent areas. By better understanding your audience, you can deliver actionable tips to help people overcome barriers to care.

When one large regional health plan set out to engage its hard-to-reach members, for instance, it went big on hyper-targeting. With the help of Linkwell Health, it developed personalized clinical messaging to support 200+ member journeys, delivered through a dedicated microsite and condition-specific email newsletters. Understanding who they were talking to and what they wanted and needed to hear paid off.

Members who received personalized messaging were:

42%
more likely to be compliant with their medications

14%
less likely to use the ER for non-emergent reasons

11%
more compliant with gap-related tests and screenings

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Social, economic, health care utilization, consumer behavior, and member interaction data are all good sources of valuable information about the audiences you need to work harder to reach. Using this data to develop user personas that specifically highlight needs and preferences will help you create more targeted content strategies.

How to Reach the Hispanic Population

Nearly 1 in 5 Americans identify as Hispanic or Latino, according to U.S. Census data. But experienced health care leaders know that simply offering bilingual brochures isn't going to cut it. Health care needs to span the spectrum of countries and cultures reflected in this larger population.

When a regional health plan in Puerto Rico found itself struggling to reach unengaged members, it partnered with

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Linkwell Health to develop Spanish-language content that integrated demographic and cultural insights to maximize relevancy and engagement.

Linkwell's content is true service journalism—study-based and expert-backed messaging that inspires readers to take an action to improve their health *today*. In the first year, tens of thousands of members did just that after reading a story, watching a video, or downloading a guide.

At the individual level, that health engagement can be transformative—lifesaving, in fact. At the brand level, it helps establish the health plan as the trusted Medicare provider in the Puerto Rican market.

When crafting a content strategy, ask yourself:
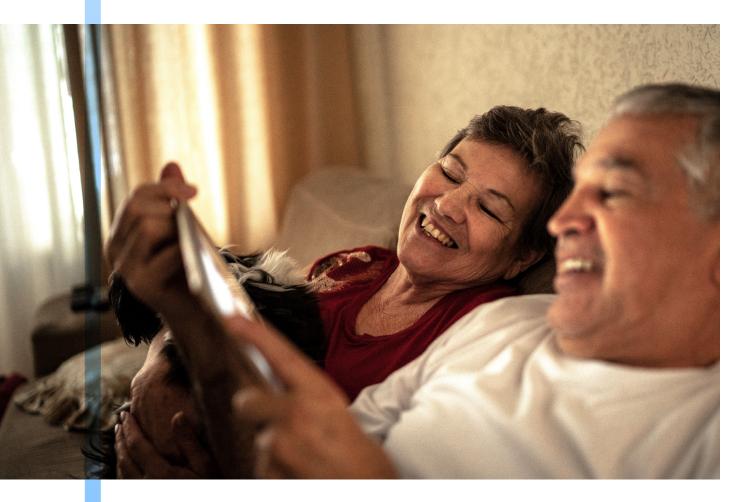
Is our target persona three-dimensional?

Common sense dictates that a single, second-generation working Latinx in New York City may have far different health care concerns than a mother of three in Arizona. So put down that broad brush and insist on a content approach that sees people not through one defining demographic but the constellation of attributes they are.

Is it culturally appropriate?

This isn't just about avoiding faux pas but really considering the unique concerns and perspectives of this population. Many COVID-19 vaccination campaigns aimed at this audience, for instance, emphasized the virus' risk to multi-generational households and reassured patients that insurance and immigration status wouldn't be issues when getting the vaccine.

Is the entire content ecosystem-accessible?

If members are given Spanish-language materials, for instance, does every QR code and hyperlink point to materials also in that language?

3 Deliver Your Message in an Irresistible Package

You found your audience and you know what they need. Now ask yourself:

How do you say it? Start by losing the medical jargon and legalese, and instead imagine a friendly conversation with a buddy at the bar.

Yes, health care organizations are the experts when it comes to, well, health care. But the person with their eyes on your site or your app or your brochure is the expert on their personal and individual needs.

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The Birth Control Information Toolkit, created by Upstream USA, is a powerful case study in delivering the same old information in a fresh and engaging format. The nonprofit wanted to help facilitate birth control conversations in provider offices, but scads of research and interviews revealed that those conversations are stressful for the patient.

So Upstream partnered with a design firm to create a toolkit that's hard to resist: A dynamic, lighthearted welcome packet covers all the basics (misconceptions, myths, FAQ) in straightforward, chatting-with-a-sister speak.

A decision-making wheel gives patients a tactile way to understand and compare their options—while also giving them the opportunity to avoid eye contact with their doc during a potentially embarrassing or difficult conversation.

A (mobile-friendly!) website breaks everything down in greater detail, all without sounding like a scolding adult or a legalese robot.

People want organizations to offer up helpful information before they're asked to engage in a transaction.

What does irresistible content mean for your campaign? We wouldn't pretend to answer that question without getting to know you first. But no matter what that campaign entails, credibility and quality are paramount if you want not just to *reach* hard-to-reach populations but to *engage* them.

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People want organizations to offer up helpful information before they're asked to engage in a transaction. And by delivering smart, targeted, practical advice on a regular cadence, your organization can build relationships with hard-to-reach populations that are based on mutual respect—and prime them for traditional marketing communications that come later on.

How to Find the Right Content Partner

Sometimes the most efficient way to hone your targeting and content messaging is to partner with a vendor. Some questions to ask as you evaluate your options in this crowded space:

What's their area of expertise?

A jack-of-all-trades agency might be a great fit for consumer products or general awareness. But for health care organizations looking to maximize their ROI, seek deep health care industry expertise. Informed service journalism—such as how-to articles and advice guides—helps engage members by answering their toughest questions. In turn, those valuable insights encourage loyalty by building more meaningful connections with members for the long-term.

Can they flex across all channels?

No surprise, a social media expert will assume social is the best fit for you. Likewise, a digital agency will sing the salvation of all things digital. But when trying to connect with hard-to-reach populations, channel selection shouldn't be at the top of your task list. Look for a content partner

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that will assess where you're at and help you fill the gaps—wherever they might be. For example, a company that has long relied on print media may need to build its mobile and email databases before it can fully transition to digital. The right partner will help build the foundation you need to succeed across distribution channels.

How do they define success?

Ten million site impressions doesn't matter much if the people seeing your content aren't the ones you're trying to reach. Likewise, getting in front of a target audience isn't a win if the content doesn't actually inspire action. When content agencies talk about proven results, ask them to dig deeper into which metrics they track and which needles they were able to help move.

Real talk

Connecting with hard-to-reach populations isn't easy (the *hard* in hard-to-reach kind of gives that away). But successful, innovative health care campaigns prove it's possible. A strategic, step-by-step approach—and expert follow-through—is what separates the well-intentioned but ineffective initiatives from the blockbuster campaigns that can effect real change in people's health—and lives.

Ready to rethink how your content connects? Linkwell Health creates transformative, actionable content and omni-channel content marketing solutions to help health plans and health services organizations deliver content that actually means something to their target audiences.

We'd love to learn more about the populations you're trying to reach. Let's start a conversation. Contact us at info@linkwellhealth.com.

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