

# what's working

custom communication  
boosts benefits engagement



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A multiemployer health fund in Washington State offered a robust set of health benefits, but the fund's trustees were concerned that many benefits were going unused.

As it launched a new member assistance program (MAP) in 2023, the Northwest Plumbers & Pipefitters (NWPP) Health Fund embarked on a mission to improve awareness of not only the MAP but the fund's other benefits and programs. The fund provides health and welfare benefits to the members of the United Association (UA) Local 26 throughout the greater Western Washington area and Local 44, based in Spokane. The fund covers more than 2,500 people.

"I've been a trustee since 2000, and I was the business manager of one of the participating locals, and I just always had the feeling that our members didn't fully grasp what their benefits were," NWPP Health Fund Chairman Todd Taylor said.

Robin Cowper, a fellow trustee, echoed Taylor's comments. "I noticed that we were putting in place a lot of really good benefits, and with the communication methods that we were relying on, it seemed like it was challenging to reach out to members in the right way," said Cowper, who has been a trustee for five years and is executive director of the Mechanical Contractors Association of Western Washington.

## Starting Out Small

The fund enlisted the help of Megan Aukema of Aukema Associates, which is now a division of Rael & Letson, to help increase engagement with the new MAP it was launching.

Instead of using off-the-shelf communications, the firm customized the MAP vendor's communications materials to resonate with fund members. It started with an announcement letter from the vendor that was mailed to members' homes, and then a wallet card was created that business agents could distribute to members.

"We really thought about the population that it was going to and tried to make it look and feel comfortable and approachable for that audience," Aukema said. For example, the initial messaging focused on stress and where to get help with managing stress.

## New Brand, New Website

After the initial MAP effort, the fund launched an extensive communication campaign in 2024. Goals for the program included building awareness of benefits, increasing engagement, educating participants and helping them self-serve.

Key elements of the rebranding process included the following.

- An updated name and logo, which would be used on all materials. The fund name was abbreviated from the Northwest Plumbing & Pipefitting Industry Health, Welfare & Vacation Trust to NWPP Health Fund.
- A custom, mobile-friendly website, where participants could access information about their benefits, forms and contact information. The new website links to the secure portal managed by the fund's third-party administrator (TPA), where participants can log in to view their personalized plan information.

The first year of the campaign sought to build familiarity with the web address and the expanded information that it allowed participants to access. Members received mailers to their homes that included QR codes to connect members to the website for information.

"The website is at the core of everything. It takes a long time for people to get used to going to the website for any questions and know that it's the place to go," Aukema said.

It was crucial for the site to be mobile-friendly, since younger members prefer to use their phones

# benefits

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to conduct business and want to avoid making phone calls, said Charity Gourley, communications consultant at Aukema Associates/Rael & Letson. However, it was also important for contact numbers to be easy to find so that older members who prefer phone calls could call the right phone number rather than the union with questions.

Employing multiple communication methods, including both digital and printed materials, is particularly important in the trades, where most members are in the field and not using a computer at work, Gourley added. In addition, some members don't have personal email addresses.

## Tailoring Communication to Member Needs and Concerns

The fund began a more frequent cadence of communication after expanding the website. The website is now regularly updated (at least monthly) with regular blog posts on health and wellness topics but also plan news and updates. Members also receive a newsletter twice a year, and fliers are posted in break rooms.

Taylor said the fund determines topics for the year and then sends monthly reminders and news about member benefits. Topics have included the importance of annual physicals, basics of enrolling in benefits and information about new benefits.

In addition to focusing on topics of special concern to the trade, communicators seek input from the plan's TPA, vendors and the board to find out what conditions are generating high claim volumes or what changes are being made to the plan.

Examples of key communication efforts in 2025 and 2026 include information on retiree health care, patient and health advocacy, mental health and getting the most out of benefits.

### Retiree Health Care

The plan offers a self-pay supplemental insurance plan for retirees over age 65 but also has a subsidized Medicare program. Through the subsidized program, a third-party vendor helps retirees choose Medicare Advantage, Medigap and Medicare Part D plans on the individual marketplace. Qualified members are reimbursed for their premiums through a health reimbursement arrangement (HRA) funded by the trust.

**NWPP**  
NW Plumbers & Pipefitters  
HEALTH FUND

nwplumberstrust.com

### Time for your Annual Exam

Top reasons to schedule annual visits early in the year.

Scheduling annual medical, dental and eye visits early in the calendar year not only starts the year off right, but it can also help you better manage your health going forward. Here are some of the top reasons to schedule your exams:

- Maximize your health benefits:** Scheduling early allows ample time to plan for any follow-up appointments, screenings, or treatments that might be needed.
- Jumpstart on a healthy year:** Sets a positive tone for healthy habits and helps you feel your best all year long.
- Catch issues early:** Identify health issues early — helping you better manage new or existing conditions.
- Better appointment options:** Scheduling now may give you more appointment options that best match your availability.
- Immunizations:** Exams are a great opportunity to receive routine immunizations, like the seasonal flu shot, or any necessary boosters.

**Find a Provider Near You**  
Visit [nwplumberstrust.com](http://nwplumberstrust.com) to find an in-network provider or Kinwell Clinic location near you.

Fliers posted in break rooms, on notice boards and at the union hall contain QR codes to direct them to the Northwest Plumbers & Pipefitters (NWPP) Health Fund website.

“The goal was to try to get a direct way for people to use this benefit service mostly because it saves them money,” Cowper said. “It’s very hard to try something new, and people don’t necessarily trust it. They’re afraid of making a change.”

The fund learned that targeted, specific communication would be the most effective. The fund asked its TPA to generate a list of members who would soon be eligible for retiree health care and those already receiving health care but not enrolled in the newer Medicare program. Mailers were created for those members and mailed to them by the TPA.

### Eastern Washington Members

In another example, the fund is creating custom communications about accessing health care for its members

in the Tri-Cities and Spokane, Washington. Members there have fewer in-network health care provider options, so a mailer will educate them on their local care options, including virtual care.

### **Mental Health**

Ongoing communications about the MAP have focused on the link between chronic pain and mental health, which leaders believed would be especially effective for the male-dominated audience in the trades. Other messages have covered seasonal affective disorder and emphasized ways that members can access care through the health care plan and the MAP. Sign-ups for the MAP increased after two 2025 awareness efforts, and the number of active users reached 40 by July.

### **Measuring Impact**

Using QR codes helps the fund assess the effectiveness of the communications program, and the fund uses Google Analytics 4 to monitor website activity.

Visits to the new website have continued to climb, totaling nearly 9,000 in 2025, and the top-visited pages are the home page, forms and documents page, and contact information page. “This tells us that participants are using the site to self-serve and find benefit information—which is the goal of the website,” Gourley noted.

Anecdotally, “our business managers have seen a decrease in the number of calls they’re receiving,” Cowper said. Benefit appeals also have declined. That points to effectiveness because it means the members are calling the right contacts and have a better understanding of their benefits.

### **Goals for 2026**

In 2026, the fund will emphasize communicating to union stewards and business agents to ensure that they are fully informed on the fund’s benefits and know where to direct members.

The fund also will conduct a member survey to assess member awareness of benefits. “We’ve had a few years of building the program and getting people directed to the website and understanding the brand,” Gourley explained. “It’s a good time for us to do a survey and gauge that awareness and then see where we can improve or tweak going forward.”

### **Advice for Other Funds**

“This idea of having consistent, ongoing communication can be kind of a new thing for many trustees,” Aukema said. “The board may know that they’re getting low engagement or getting recurring claims on the same issue, but they may not know how to communicate about it.”

“In our case, it was really important to create the brand identity for the trust because otherwise it looked like all the communication was coming from the local, from the labor side. People forget that it’s a labor management trust,” Cowper commented.

Gourley advised trustees to remember that communications programs vary by the needs of the fund. While funds like NWPP benefit from a custom website, redesigned materials and regular monthly outreach, others might require a “lighter touch,” she added.

Taylor recommended exercising patience in waiting for evidence of a program’s effectiveness. “You know you’re doing the right thing, but you don’t always get results as fast as you’d like to, but that doesn’t mean you should stop doing it,” he said.

The trust looks at the communication program as an investment rather than an expense, Cowper noted. “It alleviates administrative burden for the TPA, it alleviates a huge time commitment from the business managers who were having to answer benefits questions,” she said. “Being a health trust, we’re looking at preventive measures and trying to encourage members to use these great benefits so that ultimately they are healthier and it will save money in the long run.”