



Institute for
Healthcare Advancement

Advancing Health Literacy Toward Health Equity

Marketing and Communication

The Role of Health Literacy in Building
Patient Trust: A Guide for Healthcare
Marketers and Communicators



WHITEPAPER

Executive Summary

As a healthcare marketer, your ability to build trust with patients through communication is critical. Earning trust isn't easy thanks to complex medical jargon, misinformation, and literacy gaps that create barriers between patients and the care they need.

Health literacy is a powerful tool that should be at the heart of your marketing strategy. By ensuring your communication is clear, accessible, and engaging, you can increase patient confidence and improve your organization's reputation in the community. Ultimately, this leads to better patient outcomes and health¹.

Integrating health literacy practices will improve communication, create understanding, foster trust and advance health equity.

Implementing comprehensive professional development programs also positively impact healthcare satisfaction, health outcomes, and organizational financial outcomes

This white paper discusses the importance of health literacy from a marketing perspective and serves as a roadmap for integrating these principles into your strategy.



Essential Takeaways:

- Using plain language free of medical jargon means patients are more likely to understand and follow through on their care.
- Transparent communication builds trust and confidence, helping improve your organization's credibility.
- Culturally relevant messaging matters. It ensures your audience feels included and knows how to use important health information.
- Digital tools and technology, when implemented with accessibility in mind, can empower patients to understand their health and make more informed decisions.
- Tracking patient surveys, engagement, and other trust-related metrics helps ensure your strategies are effective and highlights room for improvement.

Introduction

Trust is a critical factor in patient engagement and retention. When patients trust the information a healthcare provider or organization gives them, they are more likely to act [on it](#). Whether that means scheduling a screening, following a treatment plan, or practicing health maintenance, the result is better patient outcomes.

But trust is fragile and can be easily undermined by poor communication, privacy concerns, or a lack of inclusivity. Your role as a healthcare marketer is to build trust with every touchpoint.

Common Barriers to Building Trust

Many healthcare organizations struggle to build trust due to:

- **(Mis)information Overload:** Patients are overwhelmed by health information. When they don't understand it or hear conflicting messages, trust suffers.
- **Privacy Concerns:** Digital tools can help make healthcare more accessible and equitable, but they also raise concerns about data security and confidentiality.
- **Complex Communication:** Overuse of medical jargon creates confusion and frustration, leaving the patient feeling isolated.

By prioritizing health literacy in your marketing strategies, you can break through these barriers and position your organization as a trusted source of health information.



The Link Between Health Literacy and Patient Trust

Building trust in healthcare marketing requires more than just transparency. Studies show that when patients receive clear, easy-to-understand health information, they are more likely to follow medical guidance and engage with healthcare [services](#). Improved health literacy helps bridge this gap in several ways by making healthcare information easier to understand and use.

1. Clear Communication Builds Confidence

Patients feel more secure in their healthcare decisions when they fully understand the information presented to them. When your marketing messages are clear, free from jargon, and well-organized, patients are more likely to trust both the information and the organization [delivering it](#).

This is especially true in today's digital healthcare setting. Individuals with low health literacy often struggle to navigate online portals and telehealth services, which can further alienate them from their care [providers](#).

2. Culturally Aware Messaging Respects the Patient's Needs

A one-size-fits-all approach to healthcare marketing doesn't work in our diverse world. Patients come from many different cultural backgrounds, speak different languages, and have varying levels of health literacy. If your marketing doesn't reflect this diversity, it can alienate your audience. By contrast, when your messaging is inclusive and culturally relevant, patients feel seen and respected. This both improves engagement and strengthens long-term trust in your [organization](#).

3. Consistency Reinforces Reliability

Providing consistent, reliable information across all touchpoints make it more likely that patients will trust your organization's messaging. Patients should have a uniform experience across your website, email marketing, print materials, and in-person communication. Reinforcing the same health-literate communication throughout your organization improves patient confidence and builds your authority as a reliable source of information.

Strategies for Using Health Literacy to Build Trust

Including health literacy best practices in your marketing makes your communication more effective. Patients are more likely to engage with healthcare services when they feel understood, respected, and confident in the information provided. As a healthcare marketer, you have the power to shape those interactions by using clear language, culturally relevant messaging, and accessible digital tools.

These strategies don't just improve patient trust. They also drive organization-wide engagement, reduce confusion, and strengthen patient-provider relationships. The following sections outline actionable ways you can apply health literacy principles to your marketing to build lasting trust with your audience.

A. Simplify Healthcare Communication

Patients are often overwhelmed by complex medical terms, which can create uncertainty and hesitation in making decisions. Simplifying your healthcare communication makes critical information easier to digest and act on. A simpler approach also leads to better engagement and increases adherence to medical advice².

Action Steps:

- Use plain language instead of technical jargon.
- Incorporate useful infographics, step-by-step guides, and videos to add clarity or emphasize important points.
- Review your existing marketing materials and rewrite content that contains medical jargon or complex language to make it easier to understand.

B. Promote Transparency

Patients often find healthcare decisions to be daunting. Being unsure of how their data is handled or what to expect from their care heightens anxiety. Using a transparent approach in all your communication reassures patients and helps them feel informed and in control. Doing so boosts their confidence in your organization and the broader healthcare system.

Action Steps:

- Explain how patient data is collected, stored, and protected in simple terms.
- Avoid confusing legalese in privacy policies and consent forms.
- Encourage transparency in print, digital, and face-to-face communication at all levels of your organization.

C. Tailor Messaging for Diverse Audiences

Every patient population has different health concerns, cultural perspectives, and communication preferences. Crafting marketing messages that resonate with diverse groups ensures that no audience feels left out or misunderstood. Personalized and culturally relevant messaging not only enhances engagement but also builds stronger connections between healthcare providers and their patients.

Action Steps:

- Research your audience demographics and preferences and use that data to craft messaging that speaks directly to unique patient needs.
- Ensure all your general materials use culturally relevant and inclusive language.
- Conduct a content audit to determine if your current marketing materials reflect the diversity of your audience and adjust them accordingly.

D. Leverage Technology for Health Literacy

Patients now rely increasingly on online resources to make important medical decisions. However, many healthcare websites and digital platforms fail to present information in an accessible way. Moreover, 16% of U.S. adults have low or no digital health literacy, particularly among underserved populations.^X Optimizing your digital content for accessibility and user-friendliness helps patients understand their health and take action to improve it.

Action Steps:

- Optimize existing patient portals, mobile apps, and chatbots to make them easier to use.
- Create new interactive tools that help patients navigate healthcare decisions and understand their care.
- Test your website and mobile app with real users to identify and fix usability or accessibility issues related to low health literacy.

Case Studies or Examples

Measuring the Impact

Understanding the effectiveness of your health literacy strategies is essential for long-term success. Tracking key metrics allows you to assess how well your messaging resonates with patients and whether trust is being built over time. Data lets you know what's working and where improvements are needed so you can continue to refine your strategy.

Of course, there's no single metric that can tell you whether patients understand your communication or trust your organization. To gain insight into those questions, monitoring these key performance indicators (KPIs) is a good start:

- **Patient Satisfaction Surveys:** Collecting feedback from patients on the clarity and usefulness of healthcare materials can help refine your messaging. If patients report confusion, you should adjust content accordingly to make it easier to understand and use.
- **Engagement Metrics:** Tracking engagement data like website visits, video views, and social media interactions helps measure how effectively your messaging reaches and resonates with your audience. High engagement signals improved trust because patients feel comfortable interacting with your content.
- **Trust-Related KPIs:** Metrics such as Net Promoter Scores (NPS) and patient retention rates help gauge long-term trust in your organization. Having many patients return for care and recommend services to others is a good sign that your health literacy strategies are working.



Conclusion

Health literacy isn't just an industry buzzword—it's a real advantage for healthcare organizations and a proven way to improve outcomes for patients. By integrating clear, accessible communication principles into your marketing strategy, you can foster patient trust and boost engagement, all while improving the health of your community.

Organizations that prioritize health literacy see increased patient satisfaction, improved brand loyalty, and stronger long-term relationships with their [communities](#).

The Institute for Healthcare Advancement (IHA) offers tailored consulting services designed to help organizations assess and improve their health literacy practices. Our services include comprehensive organizational assessments, customized training, and strategic planning to guide your journey toward becoming a health literate organization. By working closely with IHA's consultants, you'll gain insights into identifying gaps, implementing best practices, and developing a sustainable action plan.

To combat the ongoing struggle of healthcare organizations in enabling health equity, IHA created the IHA Health Literacy Specialist Certificate Program - the only accredited health literacy training program acknowledged by the Institute for Credentialing Excellence and approved by the American National Standards Institute. This program equips your team with the expertise necessary to make lasting organizational change.

To learn more about how IHA's consulting services and professional development opportunities can help transform your organization into a health-literate leader, visit IHA Academy or contact our team today.

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Speak Their Language: Health Literacy Marketing for a Consumer-Driven World

In 2025, health literacy stands as a cornerstone in health marketing, essential for bridging gaps in care and empowering consumers. This session delves into integrating health literacy principles into marketing strategies to enhance patient engagement and satisfaction in a consumer-driven healthcare landscape. Participants will learn to craft campaigns that resonate with diverse audiences, build trust, and drive measurable outcomes by leveraging clear, culturally competent communication and cutting-edge marketing tools.

The Role of Health Literacy in Building Patient Trust

- Focus: Highlight how health literacy strategies help healthcare marketers build trust with patients in a privacy-first world. Include insights on creating transparent, accessible communications that address patient concerns about data usage and privacy.
- Why It Matters: Trust is a critical factor in patient retention and brand loyalty, especially in a competitive healthcare landscape.

Health Literacy as a Marketing Advantage in the Digital Age

- Focus: Show how incorporating health literacy into digital marketing—websites, portals, and social media—improves patient understanding and drives engagement. Include practical tips for simplifying complex information.
- Why It Matters: Digital health tools are increasingly essential for consumer engagement, and health literacy is key to their success.

References

¹M. Grene, Y. Cleary and A. Marcus-Quinn, “Use of Plain-Language Guidelines to Promote Health Literacy,” in *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, vol. 60, no. 4, pp. 384-400, Dec. 2017, doi: 10.1109/TPC.2017.2761578.

²Sayfi, S., Charide, R., Elliott, S. A., Hartling, L., Munan, M., Stallwood, L., ... & Pottie, K. (2024). A multimethods randomized trial found that plain language versions improved adults understanding of health recommendations. *Journal of clinical epidemiology*, 165, 111219.



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