Designing for Health Literacy: Lessons Learned from the Southern New Hampshire Health Website Redesign

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Background

CommunicateHealth, Inc. worked with Southern New Hampshire Health (SNHH) — a regional health system encompassing over 500 providers at three Southern New Hampshire locations — to redesign their website according to health literacy best practices. The overarching project goal was to make it easier for consumers to find health care information online and ultimately access services.

Methods

The SNHH site was developed through a user-centered design process. User-centered design is a method that involves users as co-creators in every step of the design process.

- An online survey (n=204) and in-depth interviews (n=6) with SNHH staff and stakeholder gave us insights on what worked and didn’t work for professionals who use the website in their jobs.
- In focus groups with health care consumers (n=22), we learned which content was most important for consumers, along with their desired visual tone.
- Through baseline usability testing with health care consumers (n=5), the team observed firsthand where users had trouble navigating the site.
- By developing personas, we distilled what we learned and kept key user groups and tasks top-of-mind.
- In click testing (n=48), we tested a new information architecture and design to make sure that the organization, labeling, and look and feel made sense to consumers.
- Post-launch usability testing with health care consumers (n=8) allowed us to observe users navigating the live site so that we could make final tweaks based on their insights.

Findings

The health care consumers we spoke with desired a health system site that lets them do what they need to do quickly and easily. After redesigning the site according to health literacy best practices, research participants were more likely to be able to:

- Access a patient portal
- Pay a bill
- Find information about health classes and programs
- Locate a pre-registration page

Lessons Learned

Many web users — and particularly those with limited health literacy skills — have trouble completing basic tasks online. When designing a health system website, it’s essential to design with health literacy in mind to ensure that all users can complete core site tasks with ease.

- Prominent quick link buttons are effective in connecting users to the most important site tasks, like finding a doctor or paying a bill.
- A friendly and welcoming look and feel on the site resonates with users.
- Strategic use of color on buttons and links helps indicate actionability without inducing stress.
- Clear labels and reduced clutter help users feel confident that they are able to find the information they need.
- Health system sites must be responsive and fully functional on smaller devices.