

THE IMPACT OF INCLUSION

Setting new standards in medical communications

Why inclusion is critical in medical communications

Inclusion—the practice of intentional, ongoing efforts to create environments where unique perspectives and individuals are actively sought out, heard, and integrated—is increasingly recognized as an essential component of medical communications.¹⁵ Equal access to medical information is one of the ways we can achieve the broader goal of inclusion and is critical not only for patients but also for healthcare systems and

the wider public. The increasing recognition of the need for inclusion signals a global movement toward greater equity, accessibility, and diversity in the way healthcare information is delivered to, and received by, its respective audiences.¹⁵ This is a trend that extends to the wider communications industry, which is drawing growing attention to the need for more accessible and immersive experiences for all, as demonstrated by award-winning initiatives at the 72nd Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity.⁶

However, factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, a lack of consideration of disabilities (including physical, sensory, behavioral, and developmental impairments) and varying degrees of health literacy, continue to present obstacles, even at medical meetings and conferences.^{2,3,7} A survey executed by Wells *et al* found that more than 50% of conference attendees required the need for accessibility support, with many reporting their accessibility needs as not being met.⁷ Moreover, nearly 90% of adults have difficulty understanding personal and public health information when it contains complex or unfamiliar terminology⁸; such limitations in health literacy can lead to poorer health outcomes and increased healthcare costs.⁹

The importance of addressing these barriers is no doubt underpinned by robust evidence showing that clear and inclusive communication increases engagement, reduces health inequalities, and leads to improved health outcomes across populations.^{1,8,9} By being more intentional, medical communications can become more actionable and relevant for all—helping to close data gaps impacting patient populations, giving patients a voice, and thus empowering every individual to be more involved in their healthcare decisions. Ultimately, emphasizing the need to shift mindsets and actions in all aspects of medical communications is key to building trust, respect, and active engagement. So, the question remains: *how do we take the lead in driving this change in our industry?*

The unique opportunity we have as an industry

While pharmaceutical companies can take the lead in driving inclusion and realizing impact, the medical communications industry has an opportunity to offer and deliver solutions that meet the different needs of the communities our clients aim to serve.

At HCG, our mission is to accelerate the impact of science by uniting healthcare sectors and boldly defining the healthcare communications landscape. We know inclusion is a cornerstone of this mission, and we strive to partner with our clients to expand access to healthcare and drive positive health outcomes for all. As an industry, we are well placed to help convert theoretical commitments to inclusion into meaningful outcomes. This requires a structured approach, and our work at HCG addresses this gap by recognizing barriers and effectively dismantling them through intentional communication practices.

Defining what matters and benchmarking for future progress

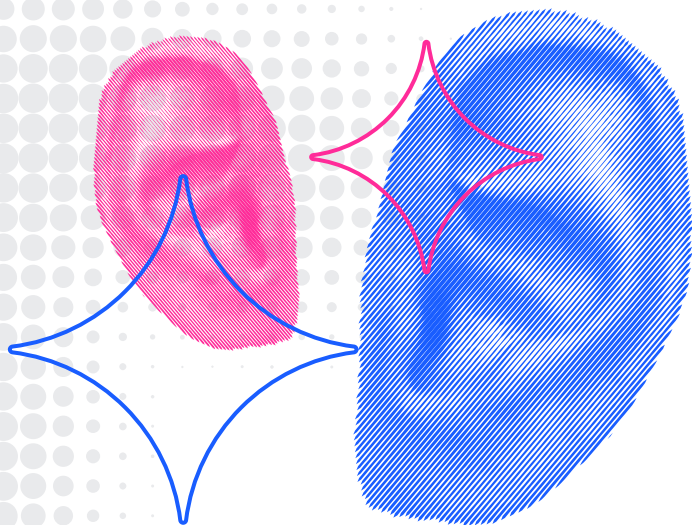
Where did we start? Our approach to evaluating the impact of our work involves some core principles, including:

- > **Establish Impact:** define and understand the impact we want to have
- > **Define Measures of Success:** determine what success looks like at a tactical level from the get-go, and how we will measure this
- > **Measure and Evaluate:** actively measure our progress, alongside regular evaluation of impact and derived value

We also truly believe it is crucial to adopt a “test-and-learn” approach, to be bold enough to take a step back and consciously ask “What is working?” and “What is not?” with our client strategies and initiatives.

A natural first step, therefore, was for us to define our objectives—thinking about where we *want* to be when it comes to living and breathing healthy inclusion in our day-to-day internal and external communications.





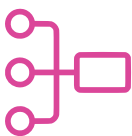
This involved exploring many aspects, such as:



Accessibility: paying attention to vision impairments by ensuring adequate color and text contrast, providing subtitles and downloadable transcripts, incorporating ALT text for images, offering language translations, and addressing the needs of individuals with mobility or dexterity challenges



Language: employing patient-centered terminology and plain language summaries where appropriate, and being sensitive to cultural and religious differences



Process integration: embedding and reinforcing inclusive practice from the outset of any given project, involving an eclectic range of internal and external stakeholders throughout initiatives to gather varied perspectives, and collaborating with internal inclusion specialists to uphold best practices

To put our “test-and-learn” mindset into practice, we surveyed a range of our ongoing projects—across project types, client organizations, and geographies—to assess how these various aspects of accessibility and inclusion are currently being considered and implemented across our work. This would set a benchmark to measure against as we move forward.

Identifying opportunities to unlock greater impact

Our survey of ongoing communications projects revealed some key findings:

- > Visual and audio features—such as subtitles, transcripts, and color-contrast adjustments—are frequently integrated, but expanding our focus to additional needs and solutions could further enhance accessibility for our audiences
- > Employing patient-centric terminology is increasingly common, but there is potential to strengthen our use of culturally competent and intentionally inclusive language
- > Several initiatives recognize the need for evidence generation to better understand gaps in healthcare, but by more actively engaging our internal inclusion experts and broadening the diversity of our internal and external stakeholder involvement, we could realize an even greater impact here
- > Tracking inclusion-specific metrics and KPIs across our work is a key area for development, but we can leverage this opportunity to better understand the true progress of our efforts within the communications landscape and within the healthcare community

Next steps for HCG in shaping inclusive medical communications

These findings not only highlight gaps in current practice but also provide a roadmap for targeted improvements. HCG is committed to embedding inclusion into our daily practices, and we are implementing a comprehensive action plan to achieve this:

- > **Accessibility features:** introducing updated guidance around accessibility considerations before, during, and after project delivery, or when approaching new business opportunities
- > **Inclusive language:** launching internal HCG educational initiatives on culturally competent terminology and inclusive language principles, and developing client-facing guidance on patient-centric language that resonates across varied populations



- > **Stakeholder engagement:** implementing structured processes and protocols to involve our internal inclusion experts throughout project lifecycles and engaging external experts as needed
- > **Actively sharing inclusion best practices:** presenting curated examples and case studies reflecting successful implementation
- > **Measurement frameworks:** guided by our impact principles, consistently measuring our progress, evaluating the impact of the above steps, and seeking new ways to enhance our approach moving forward

Inclusion: a driver, not just a checklist

By embedding and reinforcing inclusion practices, benchmarking our efforts, and adopting a test-and-learn approach, together, we can make critical strides towards positive change and impact. ■



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HCG is the global healthcare communications partner for pharma and biotech that accelerates the impact of science. We boldly define the healthcare communications landscape at the convergence of people, purpose, science, and technology.

Future Impact is HCG's thought leadership engine – accelerating the future of medical communications. Designed for pharma and biotech leaders across commercial and marketing, medical affairs, publications, and regulatory, we deliver bold ideas, actionable insights, and innovation that drives impact and shapes the future of medical communications.

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