

■ SMALL BUSINESS

Local Web builder decodes health care for Californians

BY DENNIS DOMRZALSKI | NMBW STAFF

Getting health care coverage for employees can be a headache for small businesses. Regulations and health care jargon can be confusing, and small companies that don't have human resources experts can find themselves swamped by the process.

But Albuquerque businesswoman Peri Pakroo has a way to help small businesses navigate the process of getting health insurance for their employees. She's helped a California not-for-profit agency put together a Web site to help small businesses with the effort, and she's thinking that New Mexico entrepreneurs could use the same help.

Pakroo, owner of **pea-brain media** finished the project for the **California HealthCare Foundation** in late September. The Health Coverage Guide she put together for the Foundation uses simple language to help demystify health insurance for small business people.

"Not every small business owner is willing to download a 100-page report on managed care, and so the group contracted with me to help them with the project of getting information to small business



COURTESY OF PEA-BRAIN MEDIA

Peri Pakroo, owner and director of pea-brain media

owners and to help them with the ins and outs of getting group coverage," Pakroo says.

"There is a lot of dense information and data out there and they wanted to make it accessible to the public. We wanted them to understand that in California there are guaranteed renewals, and that businesses with two to 50 employees cannot be turned down for group coverage plans

once they have such a plan. They are guaranteed to be renewed, and there are limits on how much their premiums can increase."

The site, which went live in late September, is getting 500 to 1,000 hits a week, says Marian Mulkey, a program officer for the California HealthCare Foundation. And in California, with 15 percent, or 6 million of its people without health insur-

ance, that interest is likely to rise, Mulkey says.

In New Mexico, about 23 percent, or 400,000 of the people don't have health insurance.

"It's still early, and we have not been able to do a lot of research or evaluation, but the feedback we have gotten is positive and it is pretty clear that people are really engaged and that what they are finding is helpful," Mulkey says.

Although health insurance costs have been increasing by 10 to 15 percent nationally, and many small businesses feel they can't afford it, in many ways they can't afford to not offer their employees insurance, Mulkey adds. Employees with health insurance tend to be happier and more productive, and they stay with a company longer, she says.

The Foundation's research has shown that one reason small companies don't offer health insurance is that they find the process too confusing and time consuming, Mulkey says.

"Our research has shown that employers who do not offer health insurance are not as well informed about the rules and regulations and the options. Cost is also a huge barrier, and informa-

tion can't fix that. But our theory is that if you provide good information, some of them might be in a better position to offer health insurance," Mulkey says.

Pakroo says that small business often find the effort to get health coverage "dizzying" and they don't understand the benefits.

"There are tax benefits. The amount you pay for health insurance is deductible as a business expense. My job has been to break down a lot of the complicated information and make it easy to understand," Pakroo says.

The Web site has information on rights and regulations related to buying health insurance, tax implications of offering coverage and options that may make health benefits more affordable and simpler to administer.

Pakroo, who has written two books, "The Small Business Start-Up Kit" and the "Small Business Start-Up Kit for California," says she is hoping that health providers in New Mexico, might want to build a similar site. She thinks the state, in which 80 percent of the businesses are defined as small businesses, could use it.

ddomrzalski@bizjournals.com | 348-8322