

Developing Messages

Federal, state, and local policymakers, citizens groups, healthcare providers, community partners, and the general public each play a role in public health. Effective communicators tailor messages to their audiences.

To develop messages that resonate effectively with target audiences, you will need to know why a specific audience needs to know about your work and why it is important to them. For example, if the goal is to increase flu surveillance capacity, you may develop one set of points to convince local officials to allocate funds but use a different set of points to persuade local residents to wash their hands to help prevent the flu. Once you know your audience well enough to develop targeted messages, be sure to do the following:

Communicate clearly to the audience

A strong message makes it clear to your audience that you are talking to them.

Specify your request

Be clear what you want your audience to do. For example, "value public health" is not a clear request for action. A better request would be to ask for an increase in a certain line item in a budget or a key amendment to a piece of legislation.

Provide a reward that your audience cares about

Do not assume to know what your audience cares about. For example, "it's good for you" is not a reward that motivates. If your audience's priority is homeland defense, then the safety and security that a strong public health system provides is a better reward than reduced smoking rates or lessened health disparities.

Make the reward believable by providing evidence to back it up

Evidence does not have to be hard data—in fact, some audiences are more convinced by a compelling example of how public health or prevention saved an individual life or made a lasting difference for a specific group.

Use vivid and appropriate images

A good analogy can be the single most powerful way to communicate your message. People will remember it, relate to it, and repeat it.

Choose the right moment

Messages have the greatest impact when they are delivered in the right place at the right time. Look for ways to tie the message to events that have seized your audience's attention.

Choose the right messenger

Often, the message is not as important as the messenger. An influential partner with the ear of your audience is best positioned to move your audience.

Remember, knowing your target audience and their characteristics, concerns, and values is the first step to effective messaging. A strong message should tell the audience the information they need to know, including what actions to take and what impacts the policy, program, or event could have on people's lives. Effective communication is not about you, it is about them.

Getting Started

As you begin to think about your media outreach efforts, first define the most important messages and overall goals of your project before identifying the media you want to reach. Here are a few things to think about as you get started.

Define your message

Defining the most important messages will set a sound framework for everything that follows. Here are some questions to consider:

- ❖ What do you want reporters (and, ultimately, policymakers and other members of your community) to know?
- ❖ Do you want to raise awareness, call community members to action, or both?
- ❖ Do you want to bring attention to all facets of your programs and activities or only specific one?

When defining your message, let your own experiences guide you. When talking with family and friends about public health, what part of it excites you and them the most? Focus on the most exciting aspects of the story. Do not bury your message in details or jargon. Which example do you think is more memorable?

"Americans should respect the CDC guidelines, and healthy people should not get a flu shot so there is enough for those who need it."

"For every shot that goes into the arm of a healthy adult, one small child or frail elderly person won't be able to get vaccinated."

Identify your audiences

Certain media outlets are better suited for reaching certain audiences. Here are some questions to consider:

- ❖ Who have been the primary recipients of your past work?
- ❖ Who are the specific groups that most need to know about your program, project, or event?
- ❖ Who are the audiences with natural interests in the messages?
- ❖ Which audiences will be most receptive to your message?
- ❖ Are there other new audiences you want to reach? If so, who?

If you identify multiple audiences, consider whether you are prepared to respond to an increased level of interest and inquiries from the audiences you are trying to reach. Do you have adequate staffing? If you have a Web site, is the content current and does it correspond with your media outreach activities?

Establish community partnerships

People and organizations from all sectors of the community—public, private, educational, non-profit, or philanthropic—may share your vision, goals, and activities, so partnering with them may be advantageous in reaching out to the media. If you choose to partner with another group, consider the following activities for success:

- ❖ Determine responsibilities. Have a clear plan for who will handle each task.
- ❖ Share news lists and contacts.
- ❖ Draft news releases and other project materials together and include all the partner names (and logos if feasible) on all media materials.

- ❖ Identify common audiences and determine who is best suited to reach out to those audiences.
- ❖ Prepare your organization's representatives and your partners to be spokespersons. Do they have experience doing media interviews? Do you have the right spokespersons—are they appealing to the audiences that you want to reach?

Look for news “hooks”

Take advantage of natural news hooks, such as the involvement of a local celebrity or activities timed around a national day or other local community event for the program or activity you are promoting. News hooks show media outlets that your work is timely and will attract readers, viewers, or listeners.