What Health Communication Can and Cannot Do[*]

Understanding what health communication can and cannot do is critical to communicating successfully. Health communication is one tool for promoting or improving health. Changes in health care services, technology, regulations, and policy are often also necessary to completely address a health problem.

Communication alone can:

• Increase the intended audience's knowledge and awareness of a health issue, problem, or solution
• Influence perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that may change social norms
• Prompt action
• Demonstrate or illustrate healthy skills
• Reinforce knowledge, attitudes, or behavior
• Show the benefit of behavior change
• Advocate a position on a health issue or policy
• Increase demand or support for health services
• Refute myths and misconceptions
• Strengthen organizational relationships

Communication combined with other strategies can:

• Cause sustained change in which an individual adopts and maintains a new health behavior or an organization adopts and maintains a new policy direction
• Overcome barriers/systemic problems, such as insufficient access to care

Communication cannot:

• Compensate for inadequate health care or access to health care services
• Produce sustained change in complex health behaviors without the support of a larger program for change, including components addressing health care services, technology, and changes in regulations and policy
• Be equally effective in addressing all issues or relaying all messages because the topic or suggested behavior change may be complex, because the intended audience may have preconceptions about the topic or message sender, or because the topic may be controversial

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[*] Adapted from "Making Health Communications Work", U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Public Health Service. National Institutes of Health and National Cancer Institute

Communication Can Affect Multiple Types of Change

Health communication programs can affect change among individuals and also in organizations, communities, and society as a whole:

• Individuals—The interpersonal level is the most fundamental level of health-related communication because individual behavior affects health status.

Communication can affect individuals' awareness, knowledge, attitudes, self- efficacy, skills, and commitment to behavior change. Activities directed at other intended audiences for change may also affect individual change, such as involving patients in their own care.

• Groups—The informal groups to which people belong and the community settings they frequent can have a significant impact on their health. Examples include relationships between customers and employees at a restaurant, students and parents in a school setting, employees at a worksite, and patients and health professionals at a clinic. Activities aimed at this level can take advantage of these informal settings.

• Organizations—Organizations are groups with defined structures, such as associations, clubs, or civic groups. This category can also include businesses, government agencies, and health insurers.

Organizations can carry health messages to their constituents, provide support for health communication programs, and make policy changes that encourage individual change.

• Communities—Community opinion leaders and policymakers can be effective allies in influencing change in policies, products, and services that can hinder or support people's actions.

By influencing communities, health communication programs can promote increased awareness of an issue, changes in attitudes and beliefs, and group or institutional support for desirable behaviors. In addition, communication can advocate policy or structural changes in the community (e.g., sidewalks) that encourage healthy behavior.

• Society—Society as a whole influences individual behavior by affecting norms and values, attitudes and opinions, laws and policies, and by creating physical, economic, cultural, and information environments.

Health communication programs aimed at the societal level can change individual attitudes or behavior and thus change social norms. Efforts to reduce drunk driving, for example, have changed individual and societal attitudes, behaviors, and policies through multiple forms of intervention, including communication.

Multi-strategy health communication programs can address one or all of the above.

Communication Programs Can Include Multiple Methods of Influence

Health communicators can use a wide range of methods to design programs to fit specific circumstances.

These methods include:

• Media literacy—teaches intended audiences (often youth) to deconstruct media messages so they can identify the sponsor's motives; also teaches communicators how to compose messages attuned to the intended audience's point of view

• Media advocacy—seeks to change the social and political environment in which decisions that affect health and health resources are made by influencing the mass media's selection of topics and by shaping the debate about those topics

• Public relations—promotes the inclusion of messages about a health issue or behaviour in the mass media

• Advertising—places paid or public service messages in the media or in public spaces to increase awareness of and support for a product, service, or behavior

• Education entertainment—seeks to embed health-promoting messages and storylines into entertainment and news programs or to eliminate messages that counter health messages; can also include seeking entertainment industry support for a health issue

• Individual and group instruction— influences, counsels, and provides skills to support desirable behaviors

• Partnership development—increases support for a program or issue by harnessing the influence, credibility, and resources of profit, nonprofit, or governmental organizations

Characteristics of Effective Health Communication Campaigns

Certain attributes can make health communication campaigns more effective. Use the following guidelines to plan your campaign.

Define the communication campaign goal effectively:

• Identify the larger goal
• Determine which part of the larger goal could be met by a communication campaign
• Describe the specific objectives of the campaign; integrate these into a campaign plan

Define the intended audience effectively:

• Identify the group to whom you want to communicate your message
• Consider identifying subgroups to whom you could tailor your message
• Learn as much as possible about the intended audience; add information about beliefs, current actions, and social and physical environment to demographic information

Create messages effectively:

• Brainstorm messages that fit with the communication campaign goal and the intended audience(s)
• Identify channels and sources that are considered credible and influential by the intended audience(s)
• Consider the best times to reach the audience(s) and prepare messages accordingly
• Select a few messages and plan to pretest them

Pretest and revise messages and materials effectively:

• Select pre-testing methods that fit the campaign's budget and timeline
• Pretest messages and materials with people who share the attributes of the intended audience(s)
• Take the time to revise messages and materials based upon pre-testing findings

Implement the campaign effectively:

• Follow the plans you developed at the beginning of the campaign
• Communicate with partners and the media as necessary to ensure the campaign runs smoothly
• Begin evaluating the campaign plan and processes as soon as the campaign is implemented.