Public Health Communications Strategies & Best Practices

An MWB Not-Too-White Paper

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Public health is important. Critical. A healthy population and environment provides the foundation of societal productivity, progress, community well-being, and so many other aspects that we strive to achieve in our human condition. To practitioners and advocates of public health policies, this fact is clearly evident and indisputable. Sadly, many other people, particularly those in positions of leadership, have a misunderstanding of the role public health policies play in our lives. At best, public health work is considered a necessary investment “for poor people.” At worst public health is perceived as an unneeded expense to be defunded when lean times hit. In order to reinforce the importance of public health work, and optimize the outcomes of public health initiatives, implementing an effective communications strategy is a must.

It is the purpose of this MWB “Not-Too-White Paper” to provide a resource for public health professionals in terms of best practices for the communications components of your programs.
SUCCESS: What does it look like?

Understanding the factors that lead to successful public health marketing campaigns allows for taking an evidence-based approach to communications outreach that in turn optimizes campaign effectiveness. It also demonstrates good stewardship of public funds that commonly fund public health initiatives. This is especially important in an environment in which most organizations are being forced to “do more with less,” whether that be fewer human resources, dollar resources, or both.

The first question that should be asked is whether public health communications campaigns actually lead to measurable changes in behavior. We call this the “what does success look like” exercise. It is helpful and instructive to have independent, research-backed points of view on the matter. In other words, public health communications campaigns are critical to overall public health initiatives success, and don’t just take our word for it.

Research suggests that public health and safety campaigns do indeed lead to (or are an important contributor to) positive behavior change, according to a 2012 meta-analysis (Snyder et al, 2012). This study provides useful data for anticipating the potential success of various public health campaigns and provides average effect ranges which will be helpful for setting campaign goals.
Of course, results do vary. Specific variables are the most influential on campaign effectiveness:

- the type of campaign
- whether the behavior is addictive
- and the type of “adoption” being promoted

Not surprisingly, non-addictive behaviors such as condom use are more easily changed than addictive behaviors such as smoking.

The type of adoption—commencement of a positive behavior, prevention of a negative behavior, or cessation of a negative behavior—also impacts the results. Excluding enforcement campaigns, it has been found that “commencement” campaigns (such as those promoting Pap screenings, condom use, or fruit and vegetable consumption) generally show a greater effect than prevention or cessation campaigns. Research has also noted that prevention campaigns tend to demonstrate a greater effect than cessation campaigns, presumably because it is easier to prevent an addictive behavior than to stop it after initiation.

Public health communications and commercial marketing efforts do share the commonality of bearing a necessity to define “success” at the very beginning.

If you don’t know what success looks like, you won’t know when you’ve reached it. More importantly, you won’t know if you’re headed in the wrong direction and need to correct course.
The most successful public health marketing campaigns have a theoretical framework at their core. The communication theories most often applied to modern, successful public health campaigns include the Theory of Planned Behavior, Social Cognitive Theory, the Health Belief Model, and the Transtheoretical (Stages of Change) Model.

Because the human decision-making process is complex and influenced by a number of competing factors, no theoretical model can provide a perfect framework for choosing the most effective campaign target, message strategy, and media channels. Each model has unique strengths and weaknesses. Fortunately, the models are not mutually exclusive. It is advisable to apply different models to specific health initiatives, according to which model provides the most insight and offers the greatest potential benefit.

On the following pages, we have summarized some of the most effective evidence-based communications models and have provided examples of how they have been incorporated into tangible communications initiatives.
The **Theory of Planned Behavior** is an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action, a model which was developed to explain the discrepancy between attitudes toward a behavior and behavior adoption.

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, a person’s likelihood to initiate a particular behavior is shaped by the person’s attitude toward that behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Applying the model, a public health communications initiative could influence individual behavior by changing a person’s attitude toward the behavior, altering that person’s perception of the relevant social norms, or persuading the person into believing that they have more control over the behavior than originally thought.

By understanding how each factor shapes a person’s intention to undertake the desired behavior, more effective campaigns can be developed which avoid tactics that might carry unintended consequences. For example, an HIV awareness campaign that emphasizes the devastating health consequences of infection can unintentionally discourage at-risk populations from being tested regularly.
MWB employed the Theory of Planned Behavior Model in the development of an HIV/STD awareness and testing campaign for the state of Mississippi, beginning in 2013. The campaign underscored that HIV is not a death sentence and being tested and receiving treatment is the right decision for both personal health and public health reasons. A subsequent drop in the number of people in the state who are HIV positive but do not know it (an estimated 30% decrease from 2008 to 2015) speaks to the success of this approach.

More on this campaign at mwb.com/pubhealth
Social Cognitive Theory is based upon the idea that changes in an individual’s perception of self-efficacy (how favorably a person perceives their ability to perform a particular task) are gained from four main sources of information:

- performance accomplishments (the outcome of past experiences);
- vicarious experience (observing others);
- verbal persuasion; and
- physiological feedback (how the body responds to the task).

The more dependable these experiential sources are, the greater the change possible.

Vicarious learning is especially important since people adopt many new behaviors based on their observations of others—not just first-hand experience. In other words, behaviors are learned based upon what we see others doing or refusing to do. Media platforms present a particularly influential channel for vicarious learning of both positive and negative behaviors. When popular television shows an undesirable behavior (such as risky sex) portrayed without consequences, audiences may be more likely to try the behavior. Public health messages can counter the effect of such portrayals by illustrating or alluding to the consequences.

According to Social Cognitive Theory, the likelihood that a person will adopt a behavior that has been modeled by another is influenced by the degree to which that person identifies with the model. This line of reasoning explains the popularity of celebrity spokespersons in advertising, a tactic which is most successful when the target audience identifies with that celebrity in some fashion.
MWB has utilized a variation of this model to craft safe sex messages aimed specifically at high-risk groups (individuals who have multiple partners, individuals who engage in same-sex relations, etc.). By underscoring the consequences (and also providing a solution), these campaigns have proven successful.

Specifically speaking, MWB developed a mobile application (yourPSH - or “personal sexual health” app) and promoted the app through a campaign consisting of provocative television and web messages, print ads in LGBT publications, and guerrilla tactics such as promotional coasters in noted gay bars and clubs. YourPSH was also promoted to users of dating apps Tinder and Grindr.

Since the campaign rolled out, the yourPSH app has been downloaded 2,490 times. We believe this number is especially significant given the very targeted nature of the outreach promotion and the limited platforms that were utilized.

More on this campaign at mwb.com/pubhealth
The Health Belief Model (HBM) was developed in the 1950s by researchers at the U.S. Public Health Service as a method of explaining and predicting health-related behaviors. Over the years, the HBM has been adapted and used extensively for planning a variety of public health programs and outreach campaigns.

According to the HBM, there are six important variables which predict a person’s likelihood to undertake a desired health-related action. Action is more or less likely to occur based on an individual’s perception of these factors:

- **Susceptibility** – How likely am I to be affected by the illness?
- **Severity** – How serious is the illness?
- **Benefits** – To what degree will the desired action help me?
- **Perceived Barriers** – What are the costs? Will it inconvenience me? Will it hurt me?
- **Cues to Action** – What forces are advising, informing, or reminding me to act?
- **Self-efficacy** – Will I be able to successfully adopt the behavior?
Public health media campaigns using the HBM can influence adoption of specific desired behaviors by addressing gaps where perceptions are not in line with reality. Several years ago, MWB developed a childhood immunization campaign that challenged the “vaccine conspiracy” thinking by influencing perceptions related to susceptibility (vaccine preventable diseases are coming back); severity (they are serious, life-threatening diseases); and self-efficacy (immunizations work and are safe).

More recently, we have employed the HBM model to develop MSDH’s Zika Awareness campaign. The campaign underscores the severity of the consequences of the disease (microcephaly or death for unborn infants whose mothers contract the virus) as well as plainly, directly, and repeatedly stating the facts in regard to how one should protect against Zika infection and transmission.
Unlike other theory models commonly applied to public health, the Transtheoretical Model (or Stages of Change Model) recognizes that people move through stages of change when adopting a new behavior. The model identifies the following stages:

- pre-contemplation
- contemplation
- preparation
- action
- maintenance
- termination

The Transtheoretical Model is typically applied to comprehensive interventions that involve one-on-one interaction with patients in a healthcare setting, since identifying, targeting, and messaging individuals at the appropriate stage simply isn’t practical for mass media campaigns. However, technologies such as mobile applications which can individualize messages based upon user inputs are now making such communication a viable option for public health campaigns charged with driving some of the most difficult behavioral challenges.
Transtheoretical Model • Examples

Recently, MWB built a mobile app that allows individuals to track glucose levels and delivers a “meal mixer” and “exercise mixer,” which are designed specifically to be used by diabetic or pre-diabetic patients. The goal was to promote creating healthy meals and maintaining a daily exercise program in a personal way - via the user’s smartphone.
While there has been a great deal of research regarding various models of behavior change, there are relatively few studies that examine the specific message tactics which can drive campaign effectiveness. Tactics used for tobacco prevention media campaigns have been widely studied, while research into other public health issues, such as obesity prevention, are more sporadic and certainly not conclusive.

For any public health communications effort, available research of comparable initiatives should be reviewed before settling on a strategy. The goal is to learn from what has been attempted by other efforts improve and adapt the strategy for specific audiences and particular environments.

When evidence does not provide clear direction, it is advisable to rely on target audience research (primary and secondary); networking with other public health communicators who have addressed similar issues; past experience with successful campaigns; and theoretical principles of public health models.
The way a message is framed can have a significant effect on whether a suggested behavior is perceived favorably and, ultimately, whether the targeted audience will adopt the desired action.

The difference between success and failure can, at times, come down to a few words or the tone of delivery. Cause marketers, for example, are often tempted to emphasize “the greater good” that is served by taking certain actions such as getting a flu vaccination to protect others from getting sick. However, a recent study found that this kind of message framing can actually create resistance to the desired action among American audiences.

In contrast, arguments framed in terms of individual liberty were found to be most motivating for Americans of European descent. According to the study’s author, “Appeals to interdependence might sound nice or like the right thing to do, but they will not get the job done for many Americans.” This mindset may be even more pronounced in rural areas, where political appeals to “common good” are often met with suspicion.

Similarly, campaigns that stigmatize individuals are likely to not only fail to influence target audiences, but also, produce a backlash that can jeopardize the entire objective. Several years ago, two public health campaigns from New York—one to prevent teen pregnancy and another to discourage childhood obesity—underscore this fact. These campaigns demonstrate how quickly a poor strategy can lead to negative publicity, especially when the campaign is perceived as attacking disadvantaged groups. A campaign intended to prevent teen pregnancy can, unintentionally, end up shaming and discouraging teen parents. Not good.

Understanding the psychology and mindsets of target audiences and key stakeholders is critical to framing messages so that they can be most effective. Additionally, qualitative research, including focus groups, can be an important tool for ensuring campaign messages remain on-target, especially for campaigns dealing with sensitive subjects. We call this “disaster checking.” Don’t expect to uncover new information from focus groups. But they can certainly help identify danger zones.
This example is from a recent HIV/STD awareness campaign. It was recognized that a need existed to communicate to a *large* but sensitive at-risk group: teenagers. If messages were to go too far one way, it would be too diluted to make an impact among teen audiences. Too far the other way, and there existed the risk a political backlash among socially conservative citizens. It was determined that hyper-realistic humor represented the best way to frame the message. The concept of “STDs” was personified as an over-the-hill but still too-intense pro-wrestler character. The character took questions about the myths surrounding STDs. The comedic aspects of the wrestler were offset by interjections from another character who was clearly a medical expert on STD matters. Messages about STD consequences and effective protective measures were effectively delivered in a humorous and thus non-threatening way. The video series, deemed *STD Smackdown*, was hosted online and promoted to teen audiences via YouTube pre-roll advertising.
TACTIC:
Risk Comms

Risk Communications is a tactic that most public health outreach efforts employ in some form or fashion (although it is not advisable in many instances for this to be your primary tactic - see the following page).

This tactic can be effective in situations where an information deficit exists, the underlying information is motivating enough to lead to a behavior change (due to grave consequences), and the barriers to that behavior change can be easily overcome.

This last criteria is an aspect that many risk communications efforts cannot overcome. Behaviors that have no real physiological implications, such as wearing a seatbelt, can be modified with a strict risk communications message. Behaviors such as tobacco use, due to a layer of addiction, are less effected by strict risk communications messages.
MWB rarely recommends using the Risk Communication tactic alone. In real-world practice, facts alone are rarely enough to lead to widespread behavior change. For example, most people understand that smoking is harmful and addictive, yet many choose to initiate or continue smoking. The process of adopting an unhealthy behavior isn’t typically grounded in logic and reason. Therefore, most health campaigns combine risk communication with other message tactics.

One instance in which we employed a version of the Risk Communication tactic is a “Community Cleanup” education effort. This campaign advocated for vector control efforts among individuals and municipalities by underscoring the risks of mosquito-borne illness and offering simple and effective methods of risk mitigation. One standout execution from the initiative was a short “quick hit” video developed specifically for social media platforms. The video demonstrated by first-hand POV a person getting rid of standing water from large container vessels, ultimately scaling down to dumping water from a bottle cap.
TACTIC: Countermarketing

Countermarketing is a term that refers to a range of marketing tactics used to undo public harm which has resulted from the commercial marketing of a consumer product. The approach has been successfully applied to a number of tobacco prevention campaigns in an ongoing effort to reverse more than a century of aggressive tobacco product marketing. The effectiveness of countermarketing campaigns, in particular the national Truth campaign and state-level campaigns, including one developed by MWB, has been documented by a number of studies. As a result, countermarketing is recommended in the CDC’s best practices for tobacco-prevention.
MWB’s primary use of the countermarketing tactic occurred with our previous work in youth tobacco prevention, particularly focused on teen audiences. We produced a series of hyper-realistic commercials which detailed tobacco company efforts to recruit young smokers.
Research validates that people tend to gravitate toward behaviors they believe are social norms. The social norms approach attempts to leverage this insight to reduce undesirable behaviors that are often wrongly perceived as being normal. Very simply, the approach is designed to combat the idea that “everybody is doing it.”

Following the social norms approach, research is conducted to establish the perceived norm of a targeted group and also the actual norm, relative to a particular behavior set. Next, succinct, straightforward messaging is developed to correct the misperception. If a targeted population of college students, for instance, believes that 50% of students on campus drink to excess every weekend, a series of messages emphasizes that 90% of students only have one or two drinks on average.

The social norms approach has been applied successfully to a number of college campus drinking interventions, but it has not yet been shown to be effective for more experimental applications such as sexual violence prevention and drug use. Some studies have documented changes in behavior while others have found social norm campaigns to be associated with increases in the unwanted behavior.

For this reason, MWB typically does not advocate applying the social norm approach to initiatives as a stand-alone tactic. We do believe it is important to keep social norms in mind when developing messages.
Social Norms • Examples

These are examples of public health campaigns utilizing a social norms approach. Note these are not examples of MWB work.
Public health initiatives often seek to achieve outcomes by inducing fear relative to potential consequences of a particular behavior set. Fear appeals are compelling—they get noticed and can indeed motivate change (at least temporarily) under the right circumstances.

Fear appeals can alternately activate a person’s defense mechanisms and, in some cases, even cause unwanted behaviors to increase. People rationalize that the consequence is too extreme—something that will never happen to them, or they focus on outlier instances of the behavior seemingly not affecting another person (e.g. my grandfather smoked and he never got cancer).

Evidence established over a number of respected studies indicates that fear appeals are most successful when the severity and vulnerability messages are paired with a strong self-efficacy component. In other words, the risks may be great, but you (the target audience member) have control over the outcome.
Fear Appeals • Examples

We have used a version of this tactic in Zika awareness messaging. The Zika outreach executions have clearly and plainly stated the horrific risks associated with Zika infection, but also reinforced that the audience has a large degree of control (protecting oneself) over the outcome.
THANK YOU!

For more information about Public Health Communications services offered by Maris, West & Baker, please contact Tim Mask - 601.977.9200, ext. 222 - tim.mask@mwb.com. You can also find more information by visiting mwb.com.

About MWB & #Create4Good
Maris, West & Baker is an idea + creative content company that focuses on creating positive social impact while helping partners maximize visibility. Through the disciplines of social marketing, purpose marketing, cause marketing, and corporate citizenship awareness, MWB specializes in creating and implementing campaigns that have a net positive effect within communities. MWB’s internal #Create4Good initiative recognizes and promotes projects across the globe that utilize creative skills to effect positive change. #Create4Good also manages several MWB-backed programs focusing on teaching creative skill sets to disadvantaged populations.