

This Just In... reports are a quick summary of new health marketing and communication research and trends. These brief “nuggets” spotlight new findings with communication practice implications for CDC and its public health partners.

Brought to you by the Marketing and Communication Strategy Branch in the Division of Health Communication and Marketing, National Center for Health Marketing, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

A meta-analysis of health communications research finds that there is significant opportunity to tailor health communications more efficiently to different market segments

Research objective: The goal of this study was to examine factors that determine compliance with health recommendations by trying to identify which of 22 message strategies and six individual characteristics increase or decrease health intentions.

Methods: To assess the need for tailored communications, the authors examined the impact of interactions between message strategies and individual characteristics on intentions to adhere to health recommendations. To test factors involved in health intentions, a meta-analysis on the results reported in 60 published and unpublished experimental studies on health communication involving nearly 22,500 participants was conducted.

Findings: The majority of the data came from a single exposure to a health communication message (95.8%) that encouraged participants to undertake a healthful action (74%) to prevent some health consequence (73.3%), typically a physical one (78.3%). The results from the meta-analysis were used to develop an empirical model of health communication messages to increase intentions. The model suggests several ways to tailor health communications for different audiences. Health messages promoting detection behaviors are appealing across age segments. However, health communication efforts that focus on personal consequences in an emotional manner will increase intentions in a female audience, but an unemotional appeal is more effective if the target is a male audience. Health messages that focus on personal consequences and use a vivid format (e.g., pictures) will result in higher health intentions primarily among white target audiences, but these message strategies boomerang for nonwhite audiences. Finally, prevention-focused audiences that strive to ensure safety and security appear to generate higher intentions in response to a gain-framed message (i.e., if a person undertakes the healthful behavior, he or she will gain specific benefits), whereas a loss-framed message (i.e., if a person does not undertake the healthful behavior, he or she will lose specific benefits) is more effective among promotion-focused audiences that are motivated by accomplishment and growth.

Practice implications for health marketers and communication professionals

This model can be used in at least two ways: (1) To predict the effectiveness of different health communication strategies for a given target audience; and (2) to compare the effectiveness of a particular health communication across audiences. In designing and developing health communication messages, consider emphasizing social and physical consequences in an emotional format to enhance health intentions. For example, using the following statement--“If you smoke around your kids, they are more likely to suffer from bronchitis and be ostracized by their friends because their clothes smell of smoke”—will be more effective than one that talks about the smell of smoke. Other market segments receive different messages—e.g., for older adults focus on detection rather than prevention behaviors. An example of this might be “Get tested for lung damage from the effects of primary or second-hand smoke.” For female audiences, using an emotional message emphasizing personal consequences is most effective (i.e., “Reduce your anxiety and get peace of mind by staying away from people who smoke”) but an unemotional message works better for males (i.e., “Don’t smoke and stay away from smokers”).

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