

Communicating with H.E.A.R.T.

Centering Empathy and Compassion in Public Health Communications



Public health communicators aim to create timely and evidence-based messages that connect with diverse audiences. It is equally important to develop messages that are emotionally resonant. Communicating with “heart,” or creating communications that embed empathy and compassion, is an essential ingredient for memorable campaigns that drive deeper connection with your audience.

Put Your H.E.A.R.T. Into It

Empathy and compassion are important elements of public health communications. Empathetic communications show an awareness and consideration of your audiences’ emotions, beliefs, and experiences. Compassionate communications act on awareness and consideration to console, support, and inform audiences in a responsive way. To develop communications that center both empathy and compassion, consider adding H.E.A.R.T.:

H

Honesty and Humility

Imagine you are the person seeking or receiving information.

E

Equity and Engagement

Challenge dominant or institutional thinking by inviting a diverse range of perspectives.

A

Authenticity and Accessibility

Consider the unique characteristics and abilities of your audience.

R

Reach and Resonance

Create lasting impressions by leveraging the preferences of your audience.

T

Transcreation and Transparency

Improve communications with ongoing feedback and reach audiences in new languages.

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H

Honesty and Humility

- **Honesty:** Be truthful about the situation and the information you currently know. Be explicit about your intentions, the sources you are using to gather more information, and where resource or information gaps exist.
- **Humility:** Acknowledge the complexity of the situation and information, and the requests you are asking of your audience. Provide any relevant historical context when appropriate.

E

Equity and Engagement

- **Equity:** Applying an equity lens to your work can reduce barriers to understanding and increase connection. Consider plain language, health literacy levels, and inclusive imagery when communicating.
- **Engagement:** Build relationships with trusted leaders to help tailor and deliver messaging to your community. Prioritize outreach to community members who are underrepresented or those at higher risk of adverse health outcomes.

A

Authenticity and Accessibility

- **Authenticity:** Tailor communications to the unique characteristics of your primary and secondary audiences. Invite members of these audiences to provide input on your communications to ensure authenticity.
- **Accessibility:** Ensure your materials can be used by all members of your audience. When designing new content, discuss translations, check the contrast between background and text colors, use alt text on digital images, and confirm your digital platforms are ADA compliant.

R

Reach and Resonance

- **Reach:** Experiment with new communications channels and mediums that can increase exposure to your communications. Consider a variety of formats, such as digital, print, or in-person.
- **Resonance:** Use first-person materials such as stories, imagery, and audio to enhance the stickiness of your messages. Infusing personal narratives will strengthen the connection to your communications.

T

Transcreation and Transparency

- **Transcreation:** Materials that are literally translated can often lose resonance. Consider transcreation in partnership with native speakers to inject creativity and cultural competence into your work.
- **Transparency:** Update your community on outcomes and lessons learned. Share future opportunities to contribute to message testing, resource feedback, and partnership-building.