

Insights and Inspiration: Communicating Effectively About Public Health

In partnership with the Harvard Opinion Research Program, the Public Health Communications Collaborative conducted in-depth interviews with about two dozen adults across the U.S.** During hour-long interviews, participants shared their experiences of getting information to support their health and the health of loved ones, as well as views of public health agencies and other health organizations.

Informed by the insights gathered from these interviews, the following considerations and examples aim to support public health communicators in better connecting with a diverse range of audiences.

**Participants had different demographic backgrounds (e.g., age, race, and gender), as well as differing views on government and public health.



The Journey: How People Find and Come to Trust New Sources of Health Information

Insights what the research says	Inspiration what this means for communicators	Try it Out!
When actively seeking information about a new health issue, people tend to start by Googling a topic and reviewing the results for trusted sources rather than starting with trusted sources and searching for a topic within them.	Use search engine optimization to ensure your information shows up in the results of your community's searches.	Instead of titling a webpage "Department of Health: Seasonal Respiratory Virus Bulletin," you could title it "Is it a cold, the flu, or COVID? Symptoms to watch for in (City Name) this week." This helps ensure that when a local parent searches for their child's specific symptoms, your content appears near the top of the search results – right when they're looking for a clear, trusted answer.
People often like to try out one idea or recommendation from a new information source. If it works for them, they're more likely to return to that source and trust it on other topics.	Provide bite-size health information that people can try – e.g., recipes, quick tips, or interesting facts – with links to bring them back to your organization if they like what they get!	Try sharing a simple, kid-friendly snack idea, like a no-bake yogurt and fruit parfait for hot summer days, paired with a brief reminder about staying hydrated in warm weather. By linking back to your organization's page with additional summer health resources, you give families an easy next step if they decide they want more guidance.

Emotional Influences: What People Like About New Sources of Health Information and Why

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<p>People want health information that teaches them something, not just content that entertains.</p>	<p>Feed people's desire to learn by offering more in-depth information, while still using engaging visuals and clear, accessible language. Share content in formats designed for teaching and learning, including interactive or gamified features.</p>	<p>Instead of simply telling people that a behavior is "good for you," create a short lesson that explains how it works. For example, use a simple graphic or carousel to show how fiber supports digestion and heart health, breaking the process into clear, step-by-step visuals so people walk away feeling like they learned something new – not just what to do.</p>
<p>People often worry that the information they encounter is biased, so they seek out resources that include multiple viewpoints.</p>	<p>Create ways to acknowledge multiple perspectives on an issue. This doesn't mean you have to suggest all views are correct, but showing multiple perspectives and why certain conclusions are drawn can reduce people's fears that the information they see is one-sided.</p>	<p>When sharing health information, use language that openly acknowledges multiple viewpoints before explaining your guidance. For example: "You may hear different advice about ways to support testosterone levels, from supplements to exercise routines. Here's what research tells us about which approaches are supported by evidence and why." This signals transparency and helps readers feel the information isn't cherry-picked.</p>
<p>Many people feel that the news and the internet more broadly have become too negative, leading them to avoid news altogether.</p>	<p>Even if shocking headlines or fear-based media get clicks in other contexts, remaining positive and supportive when conveying health information builds your brand as a reliable resource. Focus on what your audience can do to protect themselves rather than the horrors of what might happen if they don't take action.</p>	<p>Instead of leading with frightening statistics or warnings, highlight small, achievable actions in an encouraging tone. For example, a post about physical activity might say, "You're already doing more for your health than you think—every walk counts. Even a 10-minute walk can support your heart and mood." This reinforces agency and avoids fear-based messaging.</p>

Experiential Influences: How Personal Experiences Shape Trust in Health Information

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<p>Because most people have limited direct experience with public health, their views of the field are often shaped by other influences, including interactions with healthcare professionals and the media they consume.</p>	<p>Find as many ways as possible to share stories about your public health organization – not just public health information. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase your visibility at in-person community events.• Seek earned media that highlights how your organization has supported families of all kinds.• Share posts about community events, celebrations, or fun activities your staff are involved in!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage staff to participate in community events that aren't explicitly about public health—such as school fairs, festivals, or volunteering. Being present and engaging with people helps humanize public health beyond crisis moments. Share these activities on social media and in newsletters to reinforce that public health staff are part of the community, not just emergency messengers.• Partner with local newspapers, community newsletters, or neighborhood blogs to place stories about your organization's work and the people behind it. For example, pitch a story about a public health program that helped families access safer housing, healthier food, or better community resources featuring staff voices and community members, not just statistics. This kind of free media helps audiences see public health as practical, local, and supportive.

Read *Overcoming Challenges & Leveraging Strengths*, a practical, “choose-your-own-adventure” Action Guide grounded in the Harvard Opinion Research Program interviews with 50 public health communicators working across 50 health agencies nationwide.

Learn more at publichealthcollaborative.org/phcc-action-guide.