

Technical Assistance Bulletin

Choosing Appropriate Channels of Communications

Selecting the appropriate channels—the route or methods of message delivery—takes time. But the results are worth the extra effort. A multichannel approach not only helps ensure that the target audience is exposed to a message but also increases the chances that the message is heard, understood, and finally, acted upon. Each exposure to a message reinforces its meaning. Ideally, you should combine community, interpersonal, and mass media channels to take advantage of the strengths of each and to provide repetition and maximum exposure to your message.

Important Criteria for Selecting Appropriate Channel

Choosing the appropriate channels of communications to deliver prevention messages is a challenging and critical task. The influence your communications has on the members of your target audience depends on the effectiveness of the channel in reaching the audience, its credibility with the audience, its appropriateness to the problem, and the program purpose. Weigh your options in relation to four criteria:

Channel Selection Depends on:

- Target Audience
- Communication Objective
- Reach and Frequency
- Budget

1. Know Your Target Audience

The audience drives all decisions about channel selection. When you learn more details about your target audience, you improve your ability to judge the appropriateness of specific channels of communication. Find out which newspapers they read, what TV shows they watch, and which churches, agencies, recreation centers, and businesses serve their community. Then take it a step further. Find out which channels are considered credible and for what type of information. Your audience may watch a lot of TV solely for entertainment. Or, they may prefer to get health information from another source, such as their community elders or the local health department. Many Asian and Pacific Islander community elders are known to be effective in transmitting prevention messages through the use of chants, songs, special dialogues, and stories. Interpersonal channels may be an ideal choice for reaching many in this general audience. However, the preferences of one cultural or ethnic group or subgroup do not

represent the entire cultural or ethnic group or subgroup. Chinese Americans may get their information from different channels than Korean Americans.

Similarly, more and more people are turning to the Internet, especially youth. Are they looking for entertainment or information? Find out about the Internet sites members of your target audience visit and what they do there.

Recognize that your audience might be suspicious of certain channels because of past experience. With the spread of media literacy, audiences today are much more savvy about how information is presented and the forces that control information flow. A message may be seen or heard but ignored, or have no effect. For example, because youth living in high-risk environments understand that mass media is a business and believe that mass media messages carry a certain slant or perspective, they often shy away from such messages and prefer information or reinforcement from peers or other sources within their group.

Audience factors to consider include:

- Age
- Gender
- Cultural/ethnic group
- Occupation
- Educational level
- Size
- Family
- Socio-economic background

2. Understand the Objective of Your Communications

The channel you choose also depends on what you want to accomplish and the problem you are addressing. Determine whether you are trying to provide knowledge, for example, or whether you are creating or changing attitudes, opinions, or behaviors. If you are trying to communicate a complex message that teaches youth assertiveness in dealing with drug pushers, interpersonal

channels such as small group workshops where youth can learn and practice new assertive behaviors may be the most appropriate channel.

In the case of programs aiming to change community norms, using community and interpersonal channels of communication is appropriate. Project Garrison, a small community-based project in Baltimore, Maryland, for example, developed a strategic action plan to address substance abuse and other issues. Project Garrison used an interpersonal channel, “word of mouth,” to invite community leaders to join the Project Garrison committee. Community channels such as church bulletins and ministers’ meetings were also used to generate support for the plan from the larger community.

Consider which channel best fits your program purpose. If your objective is to raise awareness of the risks of marijuana use, you may want to put most of your resources into a mass media campaign designed for prime-time placement. If your objective is to keep preteens from drinking, that is, to influence their behavior, community and interpersonal channels may be first choices.

3. Decide on Reach and Frequency

It is important to define reach. Do you need to reach 1 million people or just the 500 that make up your target audience? Are you interested in the number exposed to the message or the number of people who act upon the message?

Once you define what you are looking for, determine which channel is likely to accomplish your objective and how frequently it will provide exposure to your message. For example, a public television station may be willing to air your public service announcement (PSA) about the risks of using methamphetamine, but if those at risk rarely watch that station, your message’s reach is limited. A poster placed at a location where members of your target audience gather may instead be a more effective option.

4. Match Needs and Methods to Budget and Staff Size

Determine program resources in terms of time, money, and staff. How many people on staff are available to carry out the work of the communications program? How much money is available to implement your communications strategy? Weigh the cost-effectiveness of using mass media channels against the need to reach an audience that may be more accustomed to oral communications. Can you reach your audience by distributing brochures where its members gather? Or should you use community organizations such as fraternal clubs, neighborhood associations, unions, religious organizations, and political organizations to deliver your messages?

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of Community Channels

Community channels can be used to:

- Disseminate information by distributing materials such as brochures and pamphlets and by displaying posters
- Develop and implement activities that use community organizations to promote messages.

Community channels can reach many people in a community at once and can be more cost-effective. Community channels can provide a shared experience that encourages steady motivation and support for community members to change behaviors and attitudes. In addition, you can build trust with your audience by using community channels that are familiar to the members of your target audience.

Hands Across Cultures, in Espanola, New Mexico, for example, embarked on a multimedia, trilingual communications campaign, with the participation of community residents, to establish substance abuse as a major agenda item among residents, businesses,

Examples of Community Channels

- Block parties
- Churches and other religious settings
- Ethnic festivals
- Healthcare clinics
- Housing developments
- Laundromats
- Local businesses
- Movie theatres
- Restaurants
- Schools
- Grocery stores
- Youth organizations such as boys' and girls' clubs

legislatures, schools, and other systems. The objective was to address a number of substance abuse-related policy issues, but raising community awareness was the first step. Videotapes were selected as the medium because of the geographic and time limitations of some communities, and because they could be used in local training sessions at the communities' convenience. The prevention messages inherent in the videos had greater saturation and impact because the viewing patterns of American Indians and Hispanics (the target audience) involve the entire extended family.

Limitations of Community Channels

- Community channels cannot provide the personalized attention characteristic of interpersonal channels, nor do they have the broad reach of mass media.
- Using community channels may also be time-consuming if you do not have established relationships with intermediaries serving your target audience.

Common Mistakes Associated With Channel Selection

- Assuming that messages in the mass media do not need to be reinforced by other means
- Assuming use of mass media will automatically ensure that the target audience understands the message
- Failing to involve members of the community and community organizations to select channels, as well as deliver messages
- Failing to interact with members of the audience to determine best channels

Strengths of Interpersonal Channels

Interpersonal Channels can be used to:

- Explore complex issues by using one-on-one communication to discuss and clarify issues
- Motivate, teach, and support behavior change in a familiar and credible context.

Often the people delivering the messages are trusted and influential within the target audience. The Safer Place, a substance abuse prevention program in Reading, Pennsylvania, for example, uses peer counselors as interpersonal channels for addressing substance abuse and gang issues with Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican, and other Latino teens. This channel provides teens with opportunities for two-way discussions with trusted members of their community.

Limitations of Interpersonal Channels

- Interpersonal channels limit the number of people who can be reached due to the requirement for individual interactions.

- Developing interpersonal channels, including recruiting and training participants, may be costly and time-consuming.

Strengths of Mass Media Channels

Mass media channels, television, radio, newspaper, magazines, billboards, and the Internet can be used to:

- Reach many people quickly
- Help to change and reinforce attitudes
- Suggest immediate action (such as calling a hotline)
- Demonstrate a skill (such as refusing an offer to smoke marijuana).

Limitations of Mass Media Channels

- Mass media channels are less personal than community and interpersonal channels. The opportunity for the face-to-face interaction often needed when addressing substance abuse-related issues is not available.
- Mass media channels are restricted by time and space. A news segment may air only for 1 to 2 minutes during a 30-minute newscast. PSAs typically last 60 seconds or less. The format or size of the page places limitations on the use of print ads.
- Mass media channels may expose your audience to the message, but the audience does not have the opportunity to receive clarification or feedback.

Remember

An important principle of health communications is to use as many different communication channels as possible. A combination of community, interpersonal, and mass media channels takes advantage of the strengths of each and provides maximum exposure to your message. However, in all cases, let your audience guide your decisions.

Communication Channel Checklist

Use the following “Communication Channel Checklist” to determine which channel — community, interpersonal, or mass media — can be used to reach your audience and achieve your communication objective(s). You may find that several options exist. However, remember to consider your budget, staff, and time when making your final decision.

To use the checklist:

1. List your target audience in the top box.
2. Put a check in the box next to the communication objectives that match your own.
3. For each objective selected, put a check in the channel’s column that will help you achieve your objective.
4. Rate the ability of each selected channel to reach your audience using a scale of 5 (best) to 1 (worst). Put the number in the reach and frequency columns to the right of each channel.
5. The channels with the highest ratings per communication objective are good places to start in reaching your target audience.

Communication Channel Checklist

Target Audience:	My Objective	Community Channel	Reach and Frequency	Interpersonal Channel	Reach and Frequency	Mass Media Channel	Reach and Frequency
Communication Objective							
Demonstrate skills							
Heighten the volume of the public health voice							
Increase community support for services or policy							
Increase demand for services							
Increase knowledge							
Influence attitudes and norms							
Raise awareness							
Refute myths and misconceptions							
Reinforce knowledge, attitudes, and behavior							
Show benefit of behavior change							
Suggest/prompt action							
Example: Demonstrate skills	✓	✓	3	✓	5	✓	5

Note: The objectives listed in the table describe what communications can do. It is not necessary to do all these things in one effort; however, the more action-oriented our communication objectives are, the more likely we are to help move people toward a desired behavior.

Resource List

AMC Cancer Research Center and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Beyond the Brochure: Alternative Approaches to Effective Health Communication*. 1993.

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Office of Cancer Communications, National Cancer Institute. *Clear and Simple: Developing Effective Materials for Low-Literate Readers*. Washington, DC: National Institutes of Health, 1994.

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You have our permission!

This bulletin is one in a series developed through CSAP's communication team. It is designed to assist programs working to prevent and reduce alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use and abuse. We welcome your suggestions regarding information that may be included in future bulletins. For help in learning about your audience, developing messages and materials, and evaluating communication programs, contact CSAP's communication team at 301-941-8500.

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