



Technical Assistance Bulletin

Identifying the Target Audience

Different messages are appropriate for different audiences. When trying to reach too many groups with a message or strategy, it is possible to reach none. This bulletin helps to narrow the focus and improve chances of reaching members of a specific target audience with the most effective message.

Identifying the target audience is an essential step in planning an effective communication program for substance abuse prevention. The target audience is the group of people that prevention messages and materials are intended to reach. Target audiences are both primary and secondary. A primary audience includes those the prevention program is designed to affect directly. A secondary audience includes those who help reach or influence the primary audience.

Most effective communication programs follow a circular six-stage process in which the last stage feeds into the first in a continuous cycle of planning and improvement. The first stage — planning and strategy selection — provides the foundation for the communication program. Good planning requires that the communication program be designed to meet the needs of a population whose members share common needs, interests, or concerns. Specifically identifying the audience (or audiences) that prevention messages and materials are intended to reach and influence helps not only to develop relevant messages and materials but also to identify the channels most likely to reach audience members.

Identifying — understanding, segmenting, and selecting — a target audience is a deliberate process that borrows from many disciplines. Understanding a target audience requires indepth research, and selecting a target audience requires considering political and social realities. To identify the target audience, define the problem, research the problem, develop an audience profile, segment the target audience, prioritize potential target audiences, and consider contributing factors. Further, to ensure program success, involve members of the target audience — which may require another cycle of planning and improvement to identify the target audience.

1. Define the Problem

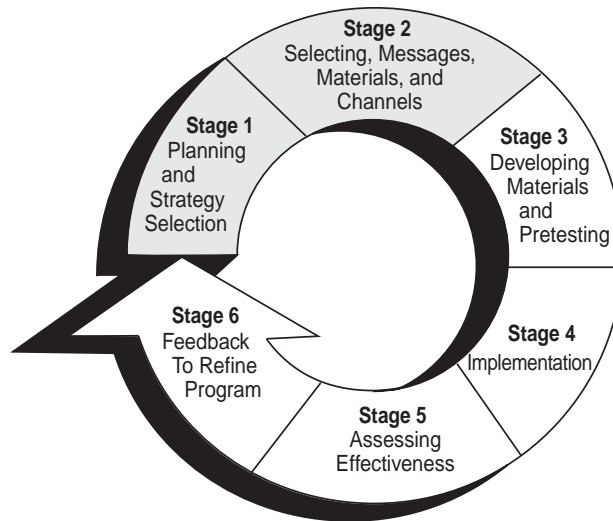
The key question to answer during this initial planning stage is “Who is the target audience?” But before this question can be answered, a careful assessment of the current substance abuse problems confronting the community or organization may be needed. An assessment and definition of the problem can help identify the target audience to be reached and influenced. Use existing information and assess the



Communications

The Health Communication Process

1. Planning and Strategy Selection
2. Selecting Messages, Materials, and Channels
3. Developing Materials and Pretesting
4. Implementation
5. Assessing Effectiveness
6. Feedback To Refine Program



community's substance abuse problem by answering the following key questions:

- What are the substance abuse problems and issues confronting the community?
- What is the extent of the problem?
- Who and how many are affected by the problem?
- What behaviors cause the most problems?
- How is the problem being addressed and by whom?
- What are the identified needs and priorities of the community with respect to the problem?
- Who is aware of the problem? What do they know?
- What resources are available to address the problem?

2. Research the Problem

When an audience is unknown or unclear, the first place to start is with research reports, literature reviews, and surveys. However, note

that these data are only tools for gaining insight, and that both quantitative and qualitative research must be combined for effectively addressing who the problem affects or how it is perceived. Qualitative research in particular provides insight into the cultural and normative behaviors of the community that are important in identifying the target for health messages and materials. Research should include reviewing existing data and gathering additional data by talking with members of the population.

Reviewing Existing Sources of Information

Local sources of information can reveal the most about potential audiences. Surveys on the prevalence of the problem and statistics on related factors such as drunk driving, domestic violence, and treatment are available on the local level. Community service providers can provide information about those creating the problem and those affected by it.

Local

- Local libraries
- Government agencies

Glossary of Key Terms

Communication program. Planned message or a series of planned messages designed around and delivered to a target audience for the purpose of preventing substance abuse.

Demographics. Social, economic, and geographic statistics of a population.

Psychographic. Psychological, sociological, and anthropological factors as well as self-concept and lifestyle characteristics pertaining to an individual or group.

Segmentation. The process of dividing a broader population into smaller groups with similar characteristics that are likely to exhibit similar behavior/reaction to a message.

Target audience. The specific population addressed by a communication program or intervention, or a specific group or subset of a broader population, that is based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, income, occupation, health status, behavior, or a combination of these or other factors.

Primary audience. Those the program plans to affect in some way. Having several primary audiences is possible.

Secondary audience. Those with influence on the primary audience or those who must do something in order to help cause the change in the primary audience.

- Community agencies
- Health departments
- Health facilities
- Treatment programs
- Clinics and hospitals
- Police records
- School records

State/National

- State agency for alcohol and drugs
- State health department
- Voluntary/health professional associations
- National/regional clearinghouses
- National agencies

The designated State agency for alcohol and drugs or State health department can provide data on prevalence of substance use, death and injury due to substance abuse, and other associated factors. National clearinghouses such as the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI) can provide background information on specific aspects of substance abuse. The Substance Abuse and

Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) have figures on national trends. NIDA sponsors the annual high school senior surveys and SAMHSA sponsors the National Household Survey of Drug Abuse. The National Health Interview Survey and the Adolescent Health and Risk Behavior Surveys conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention include questions related to substance abuse.

Gathering Data

More research results in greater knowledge about the potential target audience — which increases the chances of success in communicating prevention messages. If there is not enough information available, consider the following methods for further research:

- **Audience interviews.** Conduct in-depth interviews with members of the target population at community sites frequented by the potential target audience.
- **Gatekeeper forums.** Arrange a forum with gatekeepers who may control access to the target population. Gatekeepers can

explain what programs are already in place, how best to distribute materials, and what items or content may be controversial or unpopular.

- **Knowledge, attitude, and practices surveys.** Use surveys to find out what the target population knows about substance abuse, how they feel about use and its resulting problems, and if and when they use alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs. These surveys may be done by phone, by mail, or face to face.
- **Focus groups.** Arrange for a trained facilitator to conduct a 1- to 2-hour group discussion with six to eight representatives of the target population in order to explore the group's knowledge, attitudes, and practices. Such a session is also an opportunity to ask questions regarding the group's information sources, who they perceive as credible, and additional areas of concern.

Finding the answers to the key questions through existing data or by gathering additional data helps define the specific substance abuse problem that the community is most concerned about and helps identify potential target audiences.

3. Develop an Audience Profile

It is important to gather as much information as possible about the potential target audiences. Develop an audience profile or description by asking questions about the characteristics of the group using the following four categories:

- **Physical.** What are the age, gender, race, medical condition, and health risks of the potential target audience?
- **Behavioral.** What is the lifestyle of this group? What are their risk and resiliency behaviors, social supports, affiliations and resources, knowledge of the risks of substance abuse, personal skills, and leisure activities?

Exercise

Here is an exercise to help identify priorities.

List the potential target audiences in column 1 and the prioritizing factors in column 2. Rank the factors by indicating a plus if the answer is positive, a zero if neutral, and a minus if the answer is negative. The audience with the most pluses may be the top choice for a target audience.

Potential Target Audiences	Prioritizing Factors	Total +

- **Demographics.** What are the levels of income and education of the potential target audience? What are their marital status, family situation, culture, and home location? What are their occupations and work locations?
- **Psychographic.** What are their attitudes and beliefs about substance abuse? What are their values? What are the general personality traits of the potential target audience?

4. Segment the Target Audience

As the general target audience profile or description is developed, further assess the data and segment the target population into even more specific groups or segments. It may be that several distinct segments should be targeted.

For example, CSAP's goal for the Marijuana Campaign was to delay the onset of first use by preteens. In order to accomplish this goal, CSAP designed a communication program that targeted preteens as the primary audience (to change the age of first use) and parents as the secondary audience (to convey a no-use message and support their preteen's decision not to use).

Once the potential target audience (or market) is segmented, rank the segments by evaluating their potential for receiving and accepting the message. Ask which audience segment:

- Is at greatest risk?
- Can be influenced?
- Is ready to make a behavior change?

5. Prioritize Potential Target Audiences

When the problem and those in the community most affected by it are understood, determine which of the potential target audiences to reach with the prevention message. In some communities or organizations, decisions about which problem or behavior and which audience to target may already have been made. In others, priorities need to be set about which particular audience to reach.

Multiple audiences often emerge, however, as questions continue to be asked about the audience, the problem, and community perspectives. For example, it may be that 12- to 14-year-old boys in private schools and 12- to 14-year old boys living in rural communities are experiencing the same difficulty with a drug but perhaps for different reasons. In addition, there may be a secondary audience consisting of those with influence on the primary audience or those who must do something in order to help produce the change in the primary audience. (Thus materials for use by parents are frequently also created in designing campaigns targeted at changing youth attitudes and behaviors.) For another ex-

ample, although female adolescents may already be selected as the target audience, research may suggest a need to reach several distinct population groups within the larger, more general group of female adolescents.

The process of identifying and defining an audience leads to setting audience priorities — that is, to deciding who is most important, who is important but less critical, and who should *not* be a target for the program. Prioritize potential target audiences by asking these questions:

- Which audience is large enough to be a substantial target?
- Which audience is a priority in terms of the program's mission?
- Which audience is the target of the program's goals and objectives?
- Which audience is a priority for the funding sources?
- Which audience is reachable with communications in an affordable way?
- Which audience is not currently being targeted by others?
- Which audience will lose the most if left unattended or to struggle with its own problems?

6. Consider Contributing Factors

Contributing factors may affect the use of substances and influence the program planners' choice of a target audience. These include the lack of prevention or intervention services and communication campaigns by other agencies addressing the problem. If others are creating messages, find out who they are targeting and what their message is in order to avoid duplication and to maximize available resources.

7. Identify and Involve the Target Audience

Once the target audience has been identified and described and specific audience segments within the general population have been selected as the targets of the prevention messages and products, proceed with the next stages of planning and implementing the prevention program. The more specifically the target audience is defined, the more likely the program is to meet its goals and objectives in designing effective strategies, messages, and materials, and in selecting channels for implementing the communication program. When members of the target audience are continually involved in the planning process, they remain at the center of prevention efforts tailored to their needs. This approach also ensures that the communication program developed will be effective in reaching its intended audience.

References/Resources

American Marketing Association, *Marketing Services Guide*, 250 South Wacker Drive, Suite 200, Chicago, IL 60606 (312-648-0536) published annually. Lists suppliers and services in the United States and is available from the association.

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. Technical Assistance Bulletins. The following titles in the series are especially relevant and are available from the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI):

Communicating Appropriately With Asian and Pacific Islander Audiences, 1997.

Developing Effective Messages and Materials for Hispanic/Latino Audiences, 1997.

Urban Youth Public Education for the African American Community, 1997.

You Can Use Communications Principles To Create Culturally Sensitive and Effective Materials, 1994.

Marketing Research Associates, 111 East Wacker Drive, Suite 600, Chicago, IL 60601. Publishes audience research guidelines.

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI), Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20852 (301-468-2600 or 800-729-6686). Internet World Wide Web address: <http://www.health.org>. Provides information on substance abuse research literature, programs, and educational materials.

Office of Cancer Communications, National Cancer Institute. *Making Health Communication Programs Work: A Planner's Guide*, 1989. Covers all aspects of health communications. To order, call 1-800-4-CANCER.



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This bulletin is one in a series developed to assist programs that are working to prevent substance abuse problems. 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 the CSAP Communications Team, 7200 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 500, Bethesda, MD 20814-4820, (301) 941-8500.