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Public Health Reaching Across Sectors

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Motivating The Public To Support Public Health

A Toolkit For Communicating With Non-Experts

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About This Toolkit

This toolkit was developed to address an important challenge in the field of public health: In order to motivate audiences to understand and support public health efforts, messengers need better tools to explain their work to non–experts and describe its impact on people's lives.

To address those challenges, this toolkit includes research–based language, guidance, and best practices for communicating about public health.

The tools and messages included here are not intended to serve as a comprehensive definition of public health, nor replace other materials the field has developed (e.g., the Core Functions of Public Health and the 10 Essential Public Health Services).

Rather, you can use this toolkit to start conversations with non–experts and frame public health in a way that is relevant to their lives.

How To Use This Toolkit

These tools can help you communicate more effectively about public health. Many include language you can use verbatim if you so choose, but you can also tailor them for your work and different topics within public health.

A **Public Health Impact Formula** that articulates the role of public health in a way that is clear and motivating to non-experts.

A **Unique Value Proposition** you can use to describe the value delivered by public health and set it apart from other fields.

A **Narrative Structure** that organizes key ideas about public health. This framework can be tailored to your work and used to start conversations and generate interest.

A **One-Minute Message** and **Winning Words** you can draw on as you tailor the narrative to your work.

Tips for Cutting Through the Jargon and replacing technical jargon with memorable, motivating language.

Methodology

This toolkit was developed in partnership with Hattaway Communications, a strategic communications firm. The insights and ideas in this toolkit were developed based on an extensive research process, including:

Research Review: This review unearthed actionable insights and ideas from previous research on public health communications. It also identified lessons from social psychology and cognitive science that inform how to communicate with clarity and motivational power.

In-Depth Interviews With Public Health Messengers: Interviews with 15 public health practitioners from a range of large, small, urban, and rural health departments across the country explored their challenges communicating about their work and identified the tools, information, and resources they would need to be more effective communicators.

Focus Groups: Four focus groups were conducted with active citizens—defined in this case as those who vote regularly, meet a threshold of civic and community engagement, and share information about issues that are important to them.

These focus groups were conducted in San Jose, California and Nashville, Tennessee. Participants were recruited to represent a range of ages, genders, races and ethnicities, education levels, income levels, and political ideologies. These conversations explored the ideas people associate with public health and tested a range of language and messages to help people understand and support the field.

Public Health Impact Formula

The Impact Formula below articulates the unique functions of public health that:

· Leverage the way people intuitively think about their own health

· Differentiate public health from health care

· Motivate people to support public health efforts in their own communities

These concepts help explain the role of public health in a way that is clear and motivating to non–experts.

Diagnose

Public health experts diagnose the health of each community by listening to people who live there—and then use data, evidence, and research to offer solutions.

Cooperate

To improve the health of the community, different organizations have to work together—schools, businesses, government agencies, and more. Public health brings them together to make decisions and take action.

Prevent

We often end up in the doctor's office after we're sick or injured. Public health experts investigate everything that affects our health—food, water, air and more—to prevent health problems before they start.

INSIGHT FROM BRAIN SCIENCE

It is easier for our brains to process abstract ideas when they are expressed as actions. The concepts above use active verbs to make it easy for people to understand what the field of public health does.

Diagnose

Public health experts diagnose the health of each community by listening to people who live there—and then use data, evidence, and research to offer solutions.

Why It Works

People approach public health by looking for the same things they seek in their own health—customized diagnoses and treatments based on rigorous research and evidence.

It is important not to generalize about people's health problems or suggest that public health recommendations are one-size-fits-all.

In Their Own Words: Quotes From Focus Group Participants

"People in the community are the ones who actually know what needs to happen. And not these politicians who have no clue."

"It needs to be evidence- or science-based. Credible science."

"There are going to be a lot of outliers when it comes to diagnosing problems. So while problems affect us all, it could be a whole percentage of people in the community that have never experienced that problem."

Cooperate

To improve the health of the community, different organizations have to work together—schools, businesses, government agencies, and more. Public health brings them together to make decision and take action.

Why It Works

To the degree people associate public health with government, they are nervous that officials are making decisions behind closed doors. Emphasizing cooperation reassures people that public health experts are listening to people in the community.

Yet this cooperation must appear action–oriented to avoid triggering concerns about red tape.

In Their Own Words: Quotes From Focus Group Participants

"My sister works for CDC. And she works for a division, and it's all the bureaucrats. So it could be that side of it. The pencil pushers who are making all these dumb laws."

"That's the role of what public health should be. It's not just the responsibility of one of the parties. It's actually all the parties and all the vested interests …. So it's always a combination of different voices."

"I like the idea that public health officials bring all the people that do make a difference together."

Why It Works

Prevention is intuitive and makes clear the personal impact of public health. Conceptually, it serves as a bridge between personal health and systemic factors.

Prevention is also seen as an area where health care under–delivers, and it positions public health as part of the solution to people's frustrations.

In Their Own Words: Quotes From Focus Group Participants

"I connected to prevention. Because I feel like we need to go to the doctor before we're sick. We need to look at our communities before they're sick."

"You go to the doctor after you have stage 4 cancer. How about prevention? Prevention is huge for me. The doctor treats you after you're sick. So let's try to make sure the food and the water is safe."

"I think prevention is one of the key words on this page. Because after an outbreak happens, then you got to worry about trying to contain it, and using a lot of resources for that."

Prevent

We often end up in the doctor's office after we're sick or injured. Public health experts investigate everything that affects our health—food, water, air and more—to prevent health problems before they start.

Unique Value Proposition

People are often unclear on the role and value of public health, leading to questions like, "What exactly is public health?" and "How is it different from health care?

The following **Unique Value Proposition** is a succinct statement that describes the benefits of public health and distinguishes it from other fields. This statement can be used to introduce the topic and answer common questions.

"Just like a person makes decisions that affect their health, so does a community. We need clean air and safe neighborhoods, for example. Public health experts listen to the community and look for patterns in what is affecting their health. They use science to diagnose problems, and bring together everyone who can stop health threats before they start."

INSIGHT FROM BRAIN SCIENCE

Vivid language that evokes an image is easier to understand and remember. This message uses "clean air and safe neighborhoods," for example. As you apply this to your work, consider vivid, tangible language you could use as substitutes for this.

# Introduction To The Narrative Structure

The **Narrative Structure** shown below provides a useful method for communicating with maximum motivating power. It includes the pieces people need to understand the "story" of public health.

Narratives often flow in the order below—**people**, **goal**, **problem**, **solution**. But you can adjust the order in the way that is most intuitive for your work.
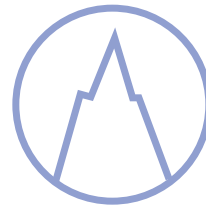
People

Who are the people involved in public health?
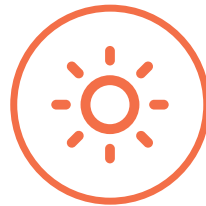
Goal

What goals are they working toward?

Problem

What problems stand in the way?

Solution

How will public health solutions benefit individuals and communities?

Below are guidelines for how to frame each element of a public health narrative.

People: The audience needs to understand the role of public health professionals—and to respect them as people.

Demonstrate that public health professionals are trained experts who draw on science and data—but also emphasize that they listen to, respect, and cooperate with the communities they serve.

Goals: People are motivated by aspirations that relate to their own lives.

Members of the public want to avoid their own health problems, so describe how public health helps prevent disease and injury that may affect each of us as individuals. Use vivid words and tangible examples like air, water, and food that create an image in your audience's mind.

Problems: Problems that sound too overwhelming or complex can demotivate audiences, who may feel that the issue is intractable.

Frame the problems that public health addresses as intuitive and solvable, and avoid undermining your audience's sense of personal agency by suggesting their health is outside their control. Instead, leverage people's frustration with health care—too much time and money wasted treating people after there's already a problem.

Solution: Your audience will be more inspired and motivated if they can see how your work impacts their lives and communities.

Public health experts bring together everyone who has a role to play in their community's health—schools, businesses, government agencies, and others—to stop health threats before they start.

One-Minute Message

The statement below expresses the key ideas from the narrative framework in a message that can be spoken out loud in about a minute. This is one example of how to motivate people to understand and support public health, though you may need to tailor it to your own work.

Public health experts are trained to diagnose the health of a community. They listen to people who know their community best and draw on science and data to recognize patterns and problems.

In the U.S., we spend so much time and money on health care, but we're not getting healthier. That's because we wait to treat people until after they're sick or injured.

Public health is designed to prevent each of us from getting sick or injured in the first place. Clean air, pure water, safe neighborhoods, and more—it's the mission of public health to make sure our cities, communities, and country have what we need to stay healthy.

Public health experts bring together everyone who has a role to play in their community's health—schools, businesses, government agencies, and others—to stop health threats before they start.

Winning Words

These Winning Words are the key words and phrases that intuitively connect with people with maximum motivating power and word–of–mouth potential. These Winning Words help spread your message because they are easy to retain and repeat.

Public health experts are trained to diagnose… They draw on science and data.	This language emphasizes that public health professionals are trained experts.
They listen to people who know their community.	Emphasizing that public health experts listen to the community helps alleviate concerns about officials making decisions behind closed doors.
…recognize patterns and problems.	"Patterns" is familiar language that connects the dots between individual health and public health.
We spend so much time and money on health care. We wait to treat people until after they're sick.	Leverage people's frustration with health care—and its lack of prevention—to set up a compelling contrast with public health.
…Clean air, pure water, safe neighborhoods…	Vivid examples help people see the role of public health in their lives. Juxtaposing two intuitive examples with a surprising one can help open people's eyes.
…bring together everyone who has a role to play. Stop health threats before they start.	Direct, action–oriented language addresses people's concerns that collaboration can lead to inefficiency.

Cutting Through The Jargon

One of the biggest challenges in communicating about public health is the use of technical jargon. Jargon is a specialized language people use within a particular professional, cultural, or social group. It has its value: Jargon allows for quick communication of complex ideas among those who speak the language.

But too often, messengers forget to translate jargon when they're talking to non–experts. When this happens, jargon no longer enables efficient communication—it prevents it.

INSIGHT FROM BRAIN SCIENCE

"Fluency theory" says that the more easily people understand information, the more likely they are to trust it. The converse is also true: Complexity reduces our ability to think and makes us less likely to understand and believe the information in front of us. When a person hears an unfamiliar word, their brain scans verbal memory for clues to its meaning. As their attention turns to this, they literally do not hear what is being said next—and can miss the whole point.

Difficult To Process: "Effective care for a mother and her baby at this time also reduces maternal mortality and intrapartum stillbirths, resulting in a triple return on investment."

Fluent To Process: "Effective care for a mother and her baby at this time also saves mothers' lives, keeps babies alive during birth, and saves three times as much money as it costs."

Checklist For Using Clear Language Non–Experts Will Understand And Remember

You can use this list of criteria to find words and phrases that are memorable and motivating. The criteria are based on research suggesting the most powerful language will 1) create emotional reactions, 2) be familiar and easy to understand, and 3) evoke visual images in the mind. You also want the message to spread via word of mouth, so you should use words that people will retain and repeat. To put these lessons into practice, try to use:

☐ **Active Verbs.** It is easier for us to understand a sentence if it's describing what someone is doing, rather than describing what something is.

"a multisectoral approach is necessary" ➡ "Different organizations need to work together"

☐ **Familiar Phrases.** Our minds ascribe importance and believability to words and phrases we've heard before.

"public health indicators" ➡ "public health report card"

☐ **Vivid Words.** Most of our informational processing is visual. If words evoke images of people, places, and things, we're more likely to remember them.

"reduce exposure to air pollutants" ➡ "make sure the air we breathe is clean, fresh, and healthy"

☐ **Repeatable Sayings.** Try to use phrases that you think your audience would be comfortable using themselves so they repeat your message to their colleagues, peers, and families.

"antimicrobial resistance" ➡ "the disease fights back"

WINNING WORDS

FEEL IT.
Does it create an emotional reaction?

BELIEVE IT.
Is it familiar and easily understood?

SEE IT.
Does it create mental images?

SAY IT.
Will people retain and want to repeat it?

INSIGHT FROM BRAIN SCIENCE

Less isn't always more. Translating jargon into plain language can result in longer phrases or sentences—and there's nothing wrong with that. Think of brevity as how quickly your audience can process what you're saying, not just how many words you're using to express it.

Crafting A Narrative About Your Work

This worksheet will help you craft a tailored narrative specific to your work. The questions ask you to describe your work in ways that reinforce the narrative best practices described on page 11. Ideally, your narrative will be about 150 words total and about one minute long when spoken.

People

Who do you work with? Describe your public health colleagues, including their expertise and how they work with and listen to the community they serve.

Goals

What is the goal of your work, and how does it keep people healthy and prevent disease or injury? Use vivid words and relatable examples.

Problems

What are problems stand in the way of that goal? Make the consequences of this problem clear, but avoid being overly complex.
If relevant, describe how traditional health care is not equipped to solve this problem.

Solutions

How does your work solve these problems? Emphasize collaborative approaches and show how the people you serve benefit from your work.

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