

Preparing Messaging and Talking Points

Shaping and Framing Issues

By shaping its own messages, a local health department can control much of the conversation about itself and its activities. Clear, well-constructed messages help people break through information overload and choose among many different sources of information.

In general, a message consisting of approximately two sentences should convey a complete idea and satisfy the following criteria:

- ❖ Define an issue in a specific way
- ❖ Identify the cause of a problem
- ❖ Be short and easy to understand
- ❖ Indicate a course of action

The message helps frame the issue for the audience. Framing an issue suggests a cause and effect—either the harmful force that endangers health (such as asbestos or risky agricultural practices), or the beneficial force that can improve health (such as nutrition education or substance abuse treatment). Framing also can depict the magnitude of a problem. Often metaphors are useful in framing.

Here's a partial example of how an issue—health literacy—might be framed:

As many as 9 in 10 Americans lack the health-literacy skills for effectively managing their health and preventing disease. The road to optimal health is a marathon, and too many of us run it wearing a blindfold.

The Media Outreach Guide section of this website contains numerous suggestions on message development. As noted there in fuller detail, some important points to remember are:

- ❖ Communicate clearly to the audience
- ❖ Specify your request
- ❖ Provide a reward that your audience cares about
- ❖ Make the reward believable by providing evidence to back it up
- ❖ Use vivid and appropriate images
- ❖ Choose the right moment, and

- ❖ Choose the right messenger.

Those tips also apply to developing talking points for a high-level presenter or spokesperson. It's especially important to avoid jargon; use plain language that will be understandable and interesting to a health reporter, elected official, consumer, or colleague from another field. Research shows that audiences give greater credence and respect to experts who express ideas in simple terms than to those who indulge in a lot of technical terminology.

Tip: Choose Your Messenger Carefully: The public listens to individual people who bring persuasive messages, not organizations.

For example, instead of saying something like this:

“The North Clover Health Department has determined that every resident should become aware of the importance of adolescent sexual health. We should not allow specific religious concerns to derail the Department’s adolescent sexual health program, which has been devised by public health experts.”
(Inflammatory, LHD-centric, patronizing, and doesn’t make a request)

Say something like this:

“Protect North Clover youth from HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, and child sex abuse. Join with schools, families, physicians, nurses, and clergy in the Adolescent Sexual Health Partnership.”