

In Support of Public Health Communicators

By Rahul Gupta, MD, MPH, FACP

Public health officials are a dedicated group of mostly scientists and healthcare professionals who have as their mission, indeed, their passion, keeping people in their communities healthy and safe. These scientists and healthcare professionals deal with complex, often uncharted issues that the public may not easily understand. Because of this, the general population may react negatively to public health endeavors that benefit the public good. To help raise the visibility and perceived value of local health departments and to communicate complex issues in easy to understand terms during a 24-hour news cycle, the scientists and the healthcare professionals who lead local health departments should partner with a competent public health communicator.

Public health communicators are experts in their field—communications. They are not necessarily epidemiologists, sanitarians, physicians, or nurses. They should have an “informed citizen’s knowledge” of all these fields and should demand and receive the respect of their colleagues. They should work with their colleagues to decide on the best person to represent the interests of their agency to the media. While this role often falls to subject matter experts, there are times when the public health communicator should be the public face of the health department.

Public health communicators are also essential in protecting the public health brand.

Local health departments are no longer organizations that just “give shots” or inspect restaurants. People look to local health departments for guidance in healthcare—particularly around access—and in responding to public health crises and natural disasters.

Establishing a local health department brand requires tools. A logo is the most basic of these tools. However, a brand is more than a logo or a tagline. These visual symbols are a part of an organization’s brand, but a brand is much more than that.

Public health communicators are essential in protecting the public health brand.

A brand identifies what makes your organization stand out. Whether intended or not, every health department already has a brand. It is up to your health department and public health communicator to define the brand rather than letting the community define it for you. Building and reinforcing a brand requires more than graphic tools. It requires a long-term commitment by every member of an organization to present that organization in a positive manner. That includes everything from the appearance of the building where your local health department conducts business to the uniforms clinical staff wear and how public announcements are made.

In today’s fast-paced media environment, public health communicators do more than respond to a few newspaper beat reporters or set up the occasional live shot for a local television station. A plethora of citizen journalists, many with no formal journalism training, may ask esoteric or biased questions and use social media to pillory officials who will not or cannot supply answers immediately. The difficult consequence of this vortex of media coverage is that some members of the media report on the story they read about on social media rather than interview credible sources with firsthand information. How often do we hear of something “going viral” in a matter of minutes?

The successful public health communicator must do the work. That means developing media lists of interested reporters from both the conventional media and the blogosphere. Communications have moved decades past sticking adhesive labels onto envelopes stuffed with photocopied news releases and dropping them at the post office. The fax machine, which revolutionized public information communication, is now

a communications dinosaur. Public health communicators should have ready access to e-mail addresses, office telephone numbers, cell phone numbers, and Twitter handles and be Facebook friends with many media colleagues.

While people write more than they once did—mostly through texts—they all think electronically. Venerable newspapers like *The New York Times* use slideshows or video sidebars to accompany their stories. The successful public health communicator will always have a plan in mind to tell the story across all media platforms in a truthful, positive manner.

For decades, public health communicators thought in sound bites. Today's communicators now have to think in 140-character Tweets that will drive the reader to click a hyperlink for more information.

Public health communicators should be up-to-date on issues occurring in the 24-hour news cycle. They should read their local newspapers online. Electronic clipping is a lot easier than scissors and a razor knife. Each day, the competent public health communicator should also read one national newspaper with some media gravitas; national news today may well be the local story tomorrow.

Americans are increasingly getting their news online, including from social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. While monitoring news- and issue-heavy Twitter accounts may be frowned upon for some employees, doing so should be an everyday duty of the public health communicator. A variety of other sources—Google Alerts, RSS feeds—should be monitored regularly to get a sense of what is trending in the media and if it has any effect on public health.

This barrage of information should allow the competent public health communicator to provide reasoned, truthful responses to the media and others making inquiries. While truthfulness has always been a hallmark of good public relations, it is even more important when the Internet has made fact-checking as easy as typing a few keywords into a search engine. Responses such as “I don’t know” and “I’ll get back to you” may be somewhat unsatisfying for both parties when a response is sought. However, an “I don’t know” will evaporate during a news cycle. Incorrect information—even if believed truthful when it is delivered—can haunt an organization for years.

Your department's goal should be to build confidence and credibility with the public, policymakers, and the media.

Governing bodies such as local boards of health, county commissions, or city administrations, who may have varying knowledge of public health, like to be made aware of what “their” health department is doing, but they do not want too much information. The successful public health communicator will work with colleagues to develop strategies to give members of governing bodies the special attention needed and keep them informed.

The successful public health communicator should know about the local health department; be aware of what is going on in the community, the nation, and the world; be available to the media; and appear calm in the face of crisis. Mistakes will be made, and when “public” appears somewhere in a job title, those mistakes are often made in public.

Your department's goal should be to build confidence and credibility with the public, policymakers, and the media. You have achieved this goal when your public health official and professional staff become the “go to” people in the community for any health-related story. Local health departments need to be available for all health stories—not just those dealing with public health. Your department may do nothing but offer a referral, but doing so will boost your brand and earn the media's appreciation.

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