Encouraging COVID-19 Prevention Behaviors

The US Government has engaged in many communication efforts related to the COVID-19 effort. Research suggests CDC messaging in April 2020 led to significant increases in mask-wearing (+12 percentage points) and mask-buying (+7 percentage points). These results underline the importance and impact of high-level leadership and communication.[1] Yet, not all messages and approaches have proven effective in bringing about actual change in attitudes and behaviors.[2]

OES put together the following rapid turnaround effort to share insights on what works to promote healthy behaviors, as relevant in the effort to combat COVID-19. These insights come from previous research on decision-making and behavior change in other contexts, and more recent evaluations in the specific context of the COVID-19 crisis. The document includes relevant evidence on the message and the format of potential communications efforts.

Make an Effective Appeal for Behavior Change

Highlight large or growing numbers of people are acting to reduce the spread of the virus[3]
- Highlight many Americans — or members of a state, local, or other community — are wearing masks, distancing, or avoiding family gatherings around the holidays to reduce spread of the virus. Refer to a specific state, local, or smaller community whenever possible.
- In a recent survey, 92% of Americans said they always or sometimes wear a mask.[4] Social media platforms can amplify positive behaviors with stickers or badges.
- Don't draw attention to the fact some people are not taking helpful steps, as this can be counterproductive.[5] If the number of people who are taking action (like mask-wearing) is not impressive, consider highlighting the number is growing.[6]

Connect prevention behaviors to people's identities[7]
- Associate health behaviors like handwashing and mask-wearing with a valued identity — especially one linked to values or ethics, like membership in a religious or other community. For example, "I'm a Midwesterner, and "Midwestern nice" is wearing a mask to protect others." This is especially important when the behavior is difficult or burdensome.
- Highlighting bipartisan support for COVID-19–related measures can reduce polarization.

Empower people
- Help people feel empowered to act. Emphasizing the threat can be effective, but couple this with messages about how to effectively reduce risk.[8] Consider including locations to pick up available masks or steps they can take now to ensure they are prepared for Thanksgiving. Give clear steps to take action.

[1] Goldberg, M. H., et al. (2020). Mask-wearing increased after a government recommendation: A natural experiment in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic. *PsyArXiv*, 20 Apr. 2020. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/uc8nz.

[2] NASEM (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine). (2016). *Science Literacy: Concepts, Contexts, and Consequences.* Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/23595

[3] Schultz, P. W., Nolan, J. M., Cialdini, R. B., Goldstein, N. J., & Griskevicius, V. (2007). The Constructive, Destructive, and Reconstructive Power of Social Norms. *Psychological Science, 18*(5), 429–434. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01917.x

[4] National Geographic. (2020). Poll finds more Americans than ever think we should wear masks. 5 October 2020.

[5] Cialdini, R. B., Demaine, L. J., Sagarin, B. J., Barrett, D. W., Rhoads, K., & Winter, P. L. (2006). Managing social norms for persuasive impact. *Social Influence, 1,* 3-15, https://doi.org/10.1080/15534510500181459

[6] Sparkman, G., & Walton, G. M. (2017). Dynamic Norms Promote Sustainable Behavior, Even if It Is Counternormative. *Psychological Science*, 28(11), 1663–1674. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617719950

[7] NASEM. (2020). *Encouraging Adoption of Protective Behaviors to Mitigate the Spread of COVID-19: Strategies for Behavior Change.* Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/25881

[8] NASEM. (2020).

Keep it simple
- Avoid information overload. Package messages clearly and concisely (e.g., 3-4 bullet points).
- People read only 20% of website text.[9] Social media platforms count three seconds as an ad "view," and many public relations companies plan for less than 10 seconds of viewing.[10]

Motivate Caring

Appeal to the common good and to protecting one's community
- "Take care of Georgia" and "Stay safe Brooklyn" appeal to social responsibility and to protecting the local economy, healthcare workers, or vulnerable community members.[11] Make the messages local by including an image of a healthcare worker from a local known hospital or describing conditions in a specific location. For example, a member of a local sports team can say: "Thank you to everyone who is taking one for the team this year."
- A message of duty was found effective at increasing the number of people in a store who recalled they should keep their distance to protect other people and staff from the virus.[12]

Use concrete stories about the dangers of the virus and focus on identifiable victims
- Instead of citing statistics, highlight specific stories of individuals who have died and families who have suffered. Connect to one's community, where possible.
- Lead the audience to think of a specific victim or individual at risk —such as a grandparent, a parent, or a known community member. Focusing on these individuals can be effective, and adding in statements about statistics can actually reduce the effectiveness of the message.[13]

Select an Effective Messenger and Format

The messenger matters: Use messengers trusted by the target audience
- Trust in the messenger, whether an individual or a credible source, is often more powerful than the content of the message itself. Targeting well-connected individuals and making their behavior change visible and salient to others through social media channels and other communication media can be a promising strategy.[14] Local faith leaders can use their pulpits or written communication to share positive messages.

Use descriptive visuals, which can be as effective as text
- The City of Portland partnered with the Behavioral Insights Team to improve COVID-19 messaging. One study found that sharing visuals alone without text achieved equal comprehension and intention, and that descriptive images can be as effective as text.[15] As an example, the number of deaths could be visually represented by recognizable stadiums ("more than six Wrigley Fields").

Tailor the framing of the message to the audience
- Segmenting messages for different populations is critical, whether by level of misinformation, level of risk, where they get their information, what choices they make, or other factors.[16]

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[9] Nielsen, J. (2008). *How Little Do Users Read?* Available at: https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/

[10] Stokes, R. (2018). *eMarketing: The essential guide to marketing in a digital world. 6th Edition.* Red & Yellow Creative Schools of Business.

[11] NASEM. (2020).

[12] City of Portland. (2020). "Behavioral Insights and Testing Outcomes." www.portland.gov/what-works-cities/behavioral-insights-and-testing

[13] Small, D. A., Loewenstein, G., & Slovic, P. (2007). Sympathy and callousness: The impact of deliberative thought on donations to identifiable and statistical victims. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 102,* 143-153. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2006.01.005

[14] NASEM. (2020).

[15] City of Portland. (2020).

[16] NASEM. (2020).