Designing impactful communication messages to drive behaviour change

Creating effective messaging that encourages behaviour change requires design. Here are some helpful suggestions and resources on how to design impactful communication messages.

Useful Tips

Use clear language

The best way to generate impact is to use language that is clear, concise, and easy to understand. Avoid using jargon and technical terms that may confuse or overwhelm the audience. Use simple language and avoid excessive or unnecessary detail.

Be clear about what action you are suggesting and how you describe it so that it is easy to understand.

You don't need to reach everyone

Does your target behaviour need to be adopted by the general population or a smaller group of people? Different approaches motivate different social subgroups.

Choose your intended audience as a first step. This lets you consider what messages might help them connect to the topic.

Emotions are a powerful driver of behaviour change

Messages that appeal to people's emotions, such as awe, hope, or pride, are more likely to inspire action than purely informational ones. Use emotional language and imagery that connects with your audience and makes them feel a personal attachment to the issue.

Be careful when using negative emotions like sadness or anger, as your message might discourage rather than motivate people to adopt an action!

Use images that are diverse and inclusive

Photos and graphics should represent the range of people you are targeting to ensure your campaign is relatable and inclusive.

There are several online databases of free-to-use images. Creative Commons is one of the largest available.

Use positive social norms to frame the message

People are more likely to adopt behaviours when they see others doing the same. Use positive social norms to frame the message and highlight the positive actions of others. For example, you could use messaging that emphasizes that "most people anchor responsibly" or "many people have switched to renewable energy".

Frame the message in terms of what people should rather than what they should not do. Highlighting negative behaviours can inadvertently normalise them, which risks having the opposite intended effect.

Use messaging that is tailored to your audience

People are more likely to act on messages that are relevant to their daily lives. Use messaging that is tailored to your audience and their specific needs and concerns.

Research your target audience. Consider their demographics and values, and use language and imagery that resonates with them.

The messenger can be more influential that the message

People are more likely to trust and act on information when it comes from a known, credible, and trustworthy source that your audience identifies with. In contrast, if the messenger is perceived as unknown, the message is less likely to have the intended impact.

Find a local champion and ask them to share your messages.

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Provide a clear call to action

Provide a clear and actionable "call to action" targeting a clearly defined and specific behaviour. The call to action should clearly state what you want the audience to do using action-orientated language. For example, if you were starting an initiative to reduce plastic pollution, asking people pack/carry a reusable cup is easier to follow than a request to 'reduce plastic'.

In the absence of targeting a specific behaviour, a simple call to action can be to encourage people to visit a website to learn more about the topic, sign up to a newsletter, or watch a video with further details about a target behaviour

Explain how to undertake the behaviour

People are more likely to take action when they feel they can make a tangible difference. As well as describing why the behaviour is important and what it is, it is important to also explain how to undertake the behaviour and what impact it will have.

Use one behaviour to target. This should be the most impactful behaviour that has the greatest chance of generating positive outcomes and being adopted by the target audience. Some suggested actions can be found on the GBRF website.

The timing of the message is important

Prompt people when they are likely to be most receptive. The same message received at different times can have drastically different levels of success.

Reduce the time between receiving the message and when you want people to adopt the action.

Ask people to make a public commitment

Ask people to make a public commitment to adopting the target behaviour. Written commitments can be made by signing a pledge card, whereas verbal commitments can be made by asking individuals to specifically state their intention of adopting a particular behaviour.

There is evidence to suggest that written pledges are more effective than verbal ones.

Test and refine your messaging

It is important to test and refine your messaging to ensure it is effective. Speak to your target audience about the message/s to gather feedback and adjust as needed.

Organise a small launch/pilot with a few people either from your target audience or who know your target audience well. Ask specific questions about whether they understood the questions and whether any questions where challenging.

Other useful resources

Four simple ways to apply EAST framework to behavioural insights

MINDSPACE: Influencing behaviour through public policy

The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions - Minchi et al. (2011) Implementation Science, 6, 42

Fogg Behaviour Model

For more resources check out our Community Reef Protection Toolkit