



Communicate **Health**

## **Green Paper**

# **When It Comes to Health Information... Plain Language Is Not Enough**

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At CommunicateHealth, we love plain language. We make an effort to use plain language in all of our communications — whether it's an email to staff, reports for our clients, or a fact sheet about lead poisoning.

We also recognize that using plain language is not the silver bullet solution to the problem of limited health literacy. When it comes to health information, plain language is not enough.

Plain language is defined as writing that people can understand and use. But do people actually use the information? And how are they using it? It's no secret that knowing and doing are two completely different things.

Health communication aims to change knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Simplifying information is important, but it doesn't get us across the finish line.

This is not the fault of plain language, but rather a lacking acceptance that communication is about more than words on a page.

So for your federal tax form, plain language may fit the bill (or not). But for health information, saying the same thing — only simpler — will likely come up short.

This Green Paper will discuss:

- What makes health information unique
- What to keep in mind when creating health content — beyond plain language

## What's special about health content?

Here are just a few of the things that make health information unique:

- Health information is personal. Even embarrassing. It's what we eat, drink, feel, do (or don't do), and worry about.
- Our understanding of health information can be affected by illness, shame, and stress. The act of seeking health information can make us feel vulnerable or empowered.
- Health, as a behavior, is learned. The very concept of "health" is a social phenomenon, defined through our interaction with doctors, friends and family, and society at large.
- Our knowledge of health and illness can be gained from prior experience, conversations with our friends, and information from TV and the Internet.
- Trust is critical. While doctors in white coats have traditionally been the trusted source of health information, this is rapidly changing with the popularity of peer-generated content on the web.



- Access to health information is a fundamental human right. There exists an ethical obligation on the part of health professionals (communicators) to provide accurate and complete information. This is because health care (in its broadest sense) is based on an assumption of informed decision making.
- “Health” has its own language: systolic, diabetic, lipoprotein, malignant, EOB, co-pay... The list goes on.

Each of these factors — and many others — influence health communication behaviors.

## Old model: Information for the sake of information

We used to think that if we gave people enough information — if we just presented them with compelling evidence — then people would make the change.

### Example: Old model

#### Why are HPV vaccines needed?

Certain human papillomavirus (HPV) types cause cancer, including: cervical, vulvar, vaginal, penile, anal, and oropharyngeal (base of the tongue, tonsils and back of throat) cancers. Certain HPV types also cause most cases of genital warts in men and women.

HPV is a common virus that is easily spread by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity with another person. It is possible to have HPV without knowing it, so it is possible to unknowingly spread HPV to another person.

HPV vaccine is a strong weapon in prevention. These safe, effective vaccines are available to protect females and males against some of the most common HPV types and the health problems that the virus can cause.

#### How common are the health problems caused by HPV?

HPV is the main cause of cervical cancer in women. There are about 12,000 new cervical cancer cases each year in the United States. Cervical cancer causes about 4,000 deaths in women each year in the United States. There are about 15,000 HPV-associated cancers in the United States that may be prevented by vaccines each year in women, including cervical, anal, vaginal, vulvar and oropharyngeal cancers.

About 7,000 HPV-associated cancers in the United States may be prevented by vaccines each year in men, and oropharyngeal cancers are the most common.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Vaccines and Preventable Diseases: HPV Vaccine - Questions & Answers. Retrieved on 6/4/2013 from <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/hpv/vac-faqs.htm>



Similarly, some health professionals believe that if we present complicated health information in clear, every-day prose, we will see dramatic improvements in adherence, compliance, and adoption of health promoting behaviors.

Unfortunately, we know now that the “knowledge leads to action” model of health communication is not so effective. For example, I know I need to exercise to maintain my health, but I still might not make it to the gym.

### **New model: Communication to spark change**

Presenting information that people can understand is an important first step, but many other factors must be present to create lasting behavior change. In order to be successful, we need to:

1. Engage consumers with health content
2. Motivate people to change their behavior
3. Increase self-efficacy

In other words, we need to connect the dots from knowledge to action.

### **Example: New model**

HPV vaccines (shots) can help protect people from serious diseases, like cancer. HPV (human papillomavirus) is the most common sexually transmitted disease. It can cause:

- Cervical cancer in women
- Genital warts and anal cancer in men and women

Doctors recommend that girls and boys get the HPV shots at age 11 or 12. The HPV vaccine works best when it’s given before a person is sexually active. The HPV vaccine is given in 3 shots over 6 months.

The vaccine is very safe. Side effects may include a sore arm. Some pre-teens may faint from any shot, so it’s a good idea to have your child sit for 15 minutes afterwards.

The HPV vaccine is covered under the Affordable Care Act. Depending on your insurance plan, your daughter or son may be able to get the vaccine at no cost to you. Talk to your insurance provider.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP) HPV Vaccine: Questions for your child’s doctor. Retrieved on 6/4/2013 from <http://healthfinder.gov/HealthTopics/Category/health-conditions-and-diseases/hiv-and-other-stds/hpv-vaccine-questions-for-your-childs-doctor>



## Engage consumers with health content

Engagement is a buzzword that gets tossed around a lot, especially in relation to marketing. You may have heard people talk about “online engagement” or “customer engagement.” For the purposes of this Green Paper, engagement means involvement or participation. (Engagement can also be a metric — an estimate of the degree of consumer interaction with content, typically on a website.)

So how do we engage consumers with health information?

By making it personal.

- 1. Let people customize content.** If you are creating content for a health website, have users select their age or interest from a drop-down menu to get tailored information — or provide health calculators, recipe finders, and other interactive tools.
- 2. Let people share content with others.** If health information is online, provide print, email, and other sharing options. Engaged consumers are more likely to become influencers of others’ behavior.
- 3. Facilitate interaction with content.** Quizzes work great on or offline. Provide activity logs and personal checklists. Try creating a daily health poll and give users instant results after submitting their answer.
- 4. Enable consumer feedback.** Let consumers rate or comment on health information on your website.
- 5. Foster a sense of identity.** Being a part of a group or community can help sustain positive health behaviors, even if the community is virtual. Think about the “Customers who bought this item also bought...” recommendation on Amazon.com. This feature provides instant affirmation and credibility — not from Amazon but from your peers.
- 6. Involve consumers in content development.** Perhaps the granddaddy of engagement is product co-development. People who use or will use your health communication products make excellent co-designers — and highly engaged consumers.

Now that we’ve roped them in, it’s time to motivate consumers to make a change.



## Motivate people to change their behavior

Every once in a while, we hear a story about someone who has a major health scare, maybe a heart attack, and the doctor lays it on the line: either change a behavior (or multiple behaviors) or face an early death. Oftentimes, people in these situations are able to overcome the odds and radically change their lifestyle. Why? Because they're extremely motivated.

For the rest of us without a major health scare, this kind of dramatic life change is difficult to achieve. Let's take a less extreme case. You are not the type of person who spends time reading health information online. Your sister calls to say she was recently diagnosed with Crohn's disease — and it's genetic. Soon you are searching dozens of health sites for information about Crohn's. Why the switch? Just like the person in the first example, your motivation level is high.

But more often than not, as public health professionals, we're trying to get people to make health behavior changes before things get serious — before there is any hint of a problem. How do we motivate people to schedule preventive screenings, lose weight, or wear a bike helmet?

- 1. Stay positive.** Changing health-related behavior is really hard. It's not like switching laundry detergents or remembering to recycle. Too often health behavior change is associated with a sense of guilt or regret, and these feelings rarely result in long-lasting change.

Knowing something is not, in itself, sufficient to cause change, but **feeling** something can be very powerful. We want that feeling to be a positive, hopeful one. So instead of telling people what **not** to do, give them plenty of positive reasons to change — tell them why it's worth it.

- 2. Tip the scales.** According to many of the traditional models of health behavior, change depends on several factors including perceived barriers and perceived benefits (or outcome expectations). The goal is to tip the scales so that the perceived benefits of change outweigh the costs (both perceived and actual). When you are creating health content, use the imaginary scale as your guide. Focus on overcoming barriers rather than on the barriers themselves.
- 3. Make it seem doable.** Try breaking down the behavior into manageable chunks. If fitting an hour-long workout into your busy schedule seems impossible, how about a 10-minute walk on your lunch break? Take the "some is better than none" approach. Breaking down a health behavior into doable "small steps" will increase self-efficacy (more on this in the following section) and in turn, motivate people to act.



## Increase self-efficacy

People are more likely to make a behavior change if they think they can succeed. This belief in our own competence is called self-efficacy, and it's an important predictor of behavior.

We mentioned earlier that increasing self-efficacy can lead to greater motivation. That's because when our confidence in our ability to complete a task is high, we're more likely to make an effort (and stick with it) even if we hit a few setbacks.

To increase self-efficacy, change the way we present health information:

- 1. Focus on how, not what.** Too often, we get caught up in telling people what to do, and we forget to tell them how to do it. Notice the difference in these two messages:

### Message 1<sup>3</sup>

Americans can reduce their consumption of sodium in a variety of ways:

- Read the Nutrition Facts label for information on the sodium content of foods and purchase foods that are low in sodium.
- Eat more home-prepared foods, where you have more control over sodium, and use little or no salt or salt-containing seasonings when cooking or eating foods.

### Message 2<sup>4</sup>

Check the label.

- Use the Nutrition Facts Label to check the amount of sodium (salt). Try to choose products with 5% Daily Value (DV) or less. A sodium content of 20% DV or more is high.
- Look for foods labeled “low sodium,” “reduced sodium,” or “no salt added.”

Prepare your meals with less sodium (salt).

- If you buy canned foods (like vegetables, beans, or fish), choose low-sodium varieties.
- If you use canned foods that aren't low sodium, rinse them before eating to wash away some of the salt.
- Use unsalted butter or soft margarine.
- Don't add salt to the water when you cook pasta or rice.
- Try different herbs and spices to flavor your food, like ginger or garlic.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010. Retrieved on 6/3/2013 from <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2010/DietaryGuidelines2010.pdf> (p. 23)

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP) Eat Less Sodium: Quick tips. Retrieved on 6/3/2013 from <http://healthfinder.gov/HealthTopics/Category/nutrition-and-physical-activity/nutrition/eat-less-sodium-quick-tips>



- 2. Include personal stories and testimonials.** When we see someone succeeding at a task, our self-efficacy increases. It's the "If they can do it, I can do it" mentality. Providing personal stories and testimonials, especially ones that include pictures or video, is a great way to model success and increase self-efficacy.

Hundreds of studies have been published demonstrating the benefits of storytelling, including a 2011 randomized control trial that showed the benefit of culturally appropriate storytelling in reducing uncontrolled blood pressure among African Americans. The intervention included patients telling stories of their personal struggles.

A word of caution: use real testimonials whenever possible (it's pretty easy to spot a fake), and be sure the images you choose reflect your target audience.

- 3. Go for immediate, small successes.** People gravitate towards actions they can take right away — like drinking a glass of water before their next meal, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, or circling a quit date on their calendar. Include at least one or two action steps that consumers can take immediately, when their motivation is highest. Small wins increase self-efficacy.

## Final thoughts: Communicating for behavior change

In order to be successful health communicators, we need to communicate clearly and inspire behavior change. Health information that's written in plain language but not actionable or motivating falls flat even with bullets, large font, and white space.

The reverse is true as well. No matter how engaging your consumer health website may be, if users can't easily understand the information, it likely won't change behavior.

The solution?

Health content that's engaging, motivating, actionable, **and** written in plain language.

