# Chapter 1: Introduction to Health Communications

### Introduction

#### Vocabulary

**Invoices:**A document that shows the details of goods or services provided, including the cost, which a person or business sends to another for payment.

**Clarify:** To make something clear or easier to understand by explaining or providing additional information.

**Counteract:** To act against or neutralize the effects of something, often to prevent or reduce its impact.

**Marketing:** Definition: The activities a business engages in to promote and sell its products or services, including advertising, market research, and promotional efforts.

**Billboards:** Definition: Large outdoor signs, often alongside roads, used for advertising products, services, or events to a wide audience.

**Stakeholder:**A person, group, or organization that has an interest or concern in a particular business, project, or system.

**Cessation:**The act of stopping or discontinuing something, often used to describe the end of an activity or process.

**Relapse:** The return or recurrence of a condition, especially a medical or behavioral issue, after a period of improvement or recovery.

**Prevalence:** The extent or frequency of occurrence of something within a specific population or area.

**Legitimacy:**The quality of being valid, lawful, or accepted as genuine and in accordance with established rules or standards.

### What is Communication?

(Publisher, 2015)

The root of the word “communication” in Latin is communicare, which means to share, or to make common (Weekley, 1967). **Communication** is defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning (Pearson & Nelson, 2000).

At the center of our study of communication is the relationship that involves interaction between participants.

The first key word in this definition is **process**. A process is a dynamic activity that is hard to describe because it changes (Pearson & Nelson, 2000). Imagine you are alone in your kitchen thinking. Someone you know (say, your mother) enters the kitchen and you talk briefly. What has changed? Now, imagine that your mother is joined by someone else, someone you haven’t met before—and this stranger listens intently as you speak, almost as if you were giving a speech. What has changed? Your perspective might change, and you might watch your words more closely. The feedback or response from your mother and the stranger (who are, in essence, your audience) may cause you to reevaluate what you are saying. When we interact, all these factors—and many more—influence the process of communication.

The second key word is **understanding**. “To understand is to perceive, to interpret, and to relate our perception and interpretation to what we already know.” (McLean, 2003) If a friend tells you a story about falling off a bike, what image comes to mind? Now, your friend points out the window and you see a motorcycle lying on the ground. How did his previous story affect your point of view of the situation? Understanding the words and the concepts or objects they refer to is an important part of the communication process.

Next, comes the word **sharing**. Sharing means doing something together with one or more people. You may share a joint activity such as when you share in compiling a report. Or you may benefit jointly from a resource such as when you and several coworkers share a pizza. In communication, sharing occurs when you convey thoughts, feelings, ideas, or insights to others. You can also share with yourself a process called intrapersonal communication. This is when you bring ideas to consciousness, ponder how you feel about something, or figure out the solution to a problem and have a moment when something becomes clear.

Finally, **meaning** is what we share through communication. The word “bike” represents both a bicycle and a short name for a motorcycle. By looking at the context the word is used in and by asking questions, we can discover the shared meaning of the word and understand the message.

#### Seven Essential Components of Communication

In order to better understand the communication process, we can break it down into the following eight essential components:

1. Source
2. Message
3. Channel
4. Receiver
5. Feedback
6. Environment
7. Context

Each of these seven components serves an integral function in the overall process. Let’s explore them one by one.

**Source**

The **source** imagines, creates, and sends the message. In a public speaking situation, the source is the person giving the speech. He or she conveys the message by sharing new information with the audience. The speaker also conveys a message through his or her tone of voice, body language, and choice of clothing. The speaker begins by first determining the message—what to say and how to say it. The second step involves encoding the message by choosing just the right order or the perfect words to convey the intended meaning. The third step is to present or send the information to the receiver or audience. Finally, by watching for the audience’s reaction, the source perceives how well they received the message and responds with clarification or supporting information.

**Message**

“The **message** is the stimulus or meaning produced by the source for the receiver or audience.” (McLean, 2005) When you plan to give a speech or write a report, your message may seem to be only the words you choose that will convey your meaning. But that is just the beginning. The words are brought together with grammar and organization. You may choose to save your most important point for last. The message also consists of the way you say it—in a speech, with your tone of voice, your body language, and your appearance—and in a report, with your writing style, punctuation, and the headings and formatting you choose. In addition, part of the message may be the environment or context you present it in and the noise that might make your message hard to hear or see.

Imagine, for example, that you are addressing a large audience of sales reps and are aware there is a World Series game tonight. Your audience might have a hard time settling down, but you may choose to open with, “I understand there is an important game tonight.” In this way, by expressing verbally something that most people in your audience are aware of and interested in, you might grasp and focus their attention.

**Channel**

“The **channel** is the way in which a message or messages travel between source and receiver.” (McLean, 2005) For example, think of your television. How many channels do you have on your television? Each channel takes up some space, even in a digital world, in the cable or in the signal that brings the message of each channel to your home. Television combines an audio signal you hear with a visual signal you see. Together they convey the message to the receiver or audience. Turn off the volume on your television. Can you still understand what is happening? Many times you can, because the body language conveys part of the message of the show. Now turn up the volume but turn around so that you cannot see the television. You can still hear the dialogue and follow the storyline.

Similarly, when you speak or write, you are using a channel to convey your message. Spoken channels include face-to-face conversations, speeches, telephone conversations and voice mail messages, radio, public address systems, and voice over Internet protocol (VoIP). Written channels include letters, memorandums, purchase orders, invoices, newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, e-mail, text messages, tweets, and so forth.

**Receiver**

“The **receiver** receives the message from the source, analyzing and interpreting the message in ways both intended and unintended by the source.” (McLean, 2005) To better understand this component, think of a receiver on a football team. The quarterback throws the football (message) to a receiver, who must see and interpret where to catch the ball. The quarterback may intend for the receiver to “catch” his message in one way, but the receiver may see things differently and miss the football (the intended meaning) altogether.

As a receiver you listen, see, touch, smell, and/or taste to receive a message. Your audience seeks to understand you as much as you might long before you take the stage or open your mouth. The nonverbal responses of your listeners can serve as clues on how to adjust your opening. By imagining yourself in their place, you anticipate what you would look for if you were them. Just as a quarterback plans where the receiver will be in order to place the ball correctly, you too can recognize the interaction between source and receiver in a business communication context. All of this happens at the same time, illustrating why and how communication is always changing.

**Feedback**

When you respond to the source, intentionally or unintentionally, you are giving feedback. **Feedback** is composed of messages the receiver sends back to the source. Verbal or nonverbal, all these feedback signals allow the source to see how well, how accurately (or how poorly and inaccurately) the message was received. Feedback also provides an opportunity for the receiver or audience to ask for clarification, to agree or disagree, or to indicate that the source could make the message more interesting. As the amount of feedback increases, the accuracy of communication also increases (Leavitt & Mueller, 1951).

For example, suppose you are a sales manager participating in a conference call with four sales reps. As the source, you want to tell the reps to take advantage of the fact that it is World Series season to close sales on baseball-related sports gear. You state your message, but you hear no replies from your listeners. You might assume that this means they understood and agreed with you, but later in the month, you might be disappointed to find that very few sales were made. You may follow up your message with a request for feedback, asking, “Does this make sense? Do any of you have any questions?” You might have an opportunity to clarify your message, and to find out whether any of the sales reps believed your suggestion would not work with their customers.

**Environment**

“The **environment** is the atmosphere, physical and psychological, where you send and receive messages.” (McLean, 2005) The environment can include the tables, chairs, lighting, and sound equipment that are in the room. The room itself is an example of the environment. The environment can also include factors like formal dress, that may indicate whether a discussion is open and caring or more professional and formal. People may be more likely to have an intimate conversation when they are physically close to each other, and less likely when they can only see each other from across the room. In that case, they may text each other, itself an intimate form of communication. The choice to text is influenced by the environment. As a speaker, your environment will impact and play a role in your speech. It’s always a good idea to go check out where you’ll be speaking before the day of the actual presentation.

**Context**

“The **context** of the communication interaction involves the setting, scene, and expectations of the individuals involved.” (McLean, 2005) A professional communication context may involve business suits (environmental cues) that directly or indirectly influence expectations of language and behavior among the participants.

Context is all about what people expect from each other, and we often create those expectations out of environmental cues. Traditional gatherings like weddings or quinceañeras are often formal events. There is a time for quiet during social gatherings such as a time for silence as the bride walks down the aisle, or when the father may have the first dance with his daughter as she is transformed from a girl to womanhood in the eyes of her community. In either celebration, there may come a time for rambunctious celebration and dancing. You may be called upon to give a toast, and the wedding or quinceañera context will influence your presentation, timing, and effectiveness.

### What is Health Communication?

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014)

Health communications is “the study and use of communications strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions related to health.”

### Case Study: Combatting the Tobacco Industry with Health Communication

In tobacco control, health communications empower individuals to change behaviors and encourage states and communities to adopt policies that reduce tobacco use, prevent initiation, and limit exposure to secondhand smoke. They are sometimes referred to as “countermarketing” because they try to counteract the marketing practices of the tobacco industry.

Health communications can be delivered through several of the following strategies:

• Paid media strategies (paying to place ads on TV, radio, billboards, transit, online platforms, or in print media)

• Earned media strategies (generating free coverage in the press and through public service announcements)

• Social media strategies (sharing messages and engaging audiences on social networking sites like Facebook and X, formerly known as Twitter)

• Program communications (delivering messages through program websites and stakeholder communications)

Other activities, like promoting the quitline and reducing or replacing tobacco industry sponsorship and promotions, are also important parts of a program’s communications effort. The combination of these strategies to communicate about a specific issue is often referred to as a communications campaign. The exact mix of strategies varies for each campaign. If sufficient funds are available, mass-reach communications channels such as TV are important to make meaningful population-level changes.

Communications campaigns may be brief or run for long periods of time. They may focus on reaching tobacco users, their families, specific populations, health care providers, the media, or decision makers. Campaigns are most effective when they are integrated into the larger program. For example, campaigns may include the quitline number or raise awareness about a new tobacco control policy.

**Importance of Health Communications**

Health communications are a critical part of comprehensive tobacco control programs. Effective health communications can raise awareness about the dangers of tobacco use, increase community support for tobacco control programs and policies, and reduce tobacco use. Health communications are also important to counter tobacco industry advertising and promotion, especially as the industry increasingly uses new advertising tactics to market products.

**Effectiveness of Health Communications**

The Community Guide recommends mass-reach health communication interventions based on strong evidence of effectiveness. These strategies can reach large audiences quickly, repeatedly, and cost effectively. As a result, they can shift social norms around tobacco use and increase acceptance of tobacco prevention and control strategies. Mass-reach health communication interventions reduce tobacco use among youth and adults, increase quit attempts, increase use of cessation services, prevent youth initiation, and reduce the likelihood of relapse among people who quit. Health communications can also affect other important outcomes, such as changes in attitudes toward tobacco use and secondhand smoke and the adoption of tobacco control policies.

**Health Communication Strategies**

Paid media strategies deliver messages through paid placements on mass media channels like TV or radio. Paid media is extremely beneficial and perhaps its greatest strength is its potential to reach large numbers of people without in-person interactions. Although they can be expensive, paid media strategies allow programs to control an ad’s content and where, when, and how often it will run. Paid media includes ads on TV, on the radio, in print, and on billboards or public transit.

In recent years, digital advertising has increased as people spend more of their time connected to the internet through smartphones, tablets, and computers. Although TV is most effective at reaching broad audiences and changing knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, communications efforts often include a variety of paid media channels. Using multiple channels makes campaigns appear more widespread, encouraging people to talk about campaign messages and to believe there is a social expectation not to use tobacco products.

Paid media is a critical part of tobacco control communications. Adequately funded paid media strategies decrease adult and youth smoking prevalence, youth initiation, and the likelihood that youth will become established smokers. Exposure to paid media also increases the likelihood that a smoker will try to quit and decreases the chance of relapse among those who have quit.

Statewide paid media strategies can also coordinate with local programs to support community-level efforts. States with the most dramatic changes in tobacco attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors have used paid media to challenge the legitimacy of industry advertising tactics and publicize the health consequences of tobacco use and secondhand smoke exposure. Although total costs to implement paid media strategies may seem high, they are cost effective when compared to the costs of tobacco use and exposure. From 2000 to 2002, the National Truth® Campaign cost $324 million but prevented over $1.9 billion in health care costs.

**Earned Media**

Earned, or unpaid, media strategies generate free coverage of a story or issue. Programs get coverage by working with the press to generate news stories or creating public service announcements (PSAs) to air for free on paid media channels. These strategies are called “earned” media because the communications team has to get the attention of media outlets and the public to earn coverage.

Earned media strategies are also sometimes called public relations or media relations. Earned media is an important part of any communications campaign, but especially when funds are limited. Although earned media coverage can be a useful low-cost strategy, the communications team has less control over the content or placement of stories than with paid media.

**News Coverage**

Earned media coverage includes news stories, letters to the editor, editorials, or interviews. Coverage may run on a variety of channels, including TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, or digital news outlets (see Table 1 below). News coverage may be created by the media outlet, the communications team, or community members. Although the media outlet ultimately decides which pieces are published and how they are framed, the communications team can work to generate interest that leads to news coverage.

Strategies to earn news coverage can support tobacco control goals by changing knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors among youth and adults and influencing tobacco control policies. For example, from 1999 to 2002, the Students Working Against Tobacco group in Florida used earned media strategies to generate high levels of media coverage. This coverage contributed to the enactment of laws to place tobacco products behind store counters.

News coverage enhances the effectiveness of the overall campaign by complementing, but not replacing, paid media efforts. The total number of news stories is often far greater than the number of times paid media is broadcast, making news coverage crucial to extend a campaign’s reach. News coverage also allows a campaign to continue the conversation even after paid ads are off the air or out of print.

**Public Service Announcements (PSAs)**

PSAs are educational messages broadcast for free by media outlets. They typically air on TV and radio, but can be modified for print, internet, and outdoor use. PSAs are useful when the communications budget does not allow for paid media, but the program still wants to raise awareness of an issue with a general audience.

**Social Media**

In recent years, the internet has shifted from information created by experts to content developed through audience participation and interaction. This change, combined with increased access to the internet and its global reach, has created new opportunities for health communications to get the attention of the public. Innovative tobacco control communications using social media and blogs have emerged to take advantage of these new opportunities.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook and X, are online communities where people gather to interact with family, friends, coworkers, and others with similar interests. Blogs are online, interactive journals where readers can leave comments and start new conversations. These platforms have created new opportunities for people, audiences, to interact with health campaigns.

**Why Invest in Health Communications?**

 Health communications are powerful tools to prevent unhealthy habits, promote health, and shape social norms. They reach large audiences to shape population-wide patterns.

### References

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