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Clear Messages for Effective Communication

In today's world we are bombarded with urgent, instant, up-to-the minute news and messages (think CNN, the Internet, BlackBerries, iPhones). Many statistics detail the costs of information overload to businesses.

But what about the costs to the public? The average person receives hundreds—if not thousands—of bits of information every day. In 1997, a Reuters report stated that "In the last 30 years mankind has produced more information than in the previous 5,000 ("Information Overload," 1997)." Our messages—important messages for protecting health—must compete with a cacophony of information about seemingly anything and everything.

Couple that information overload with the finding that 9 million (43%) American adults read at basic levels (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003). Adults who read at below basic levels have no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills; those at basic levels can perform simple everyday activities. And when you look at health literacy—the ability to understand and communicate health information—the percentage drops to 36% of adults (NCES, 2006).

How can we help our messages get through in the chaos of information overload? By creating materials in plain language (easy to understand and presented in an easy-to-read format). This column will give you some tips about message content as well as formatting.

Message Content

- Limit the number of messages in your materials (three is best). (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 1999; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2006). Cramming too many messages into one document can confuse your readers and leave them wondering which message is most important. They may even give up on your document completely.
- Eliminate unnecessary words, jargon, and technical language where possible. If you must use technical language, define terms. Consider grouping terms in one place (e.g., a text box). If you must use acronyms, spell them out the first time and then use the abbreviation. But think about your audience: do your readers need to know the official title (e.g., Your Agency, Your Department, and Your Branch), or does "the agency" suffice?
- Make your content relevant to readers.
- Tell readers what you want them to do: use active voice and conversational style (see Table 1) and concrete examples.
- Tell your readers first what they most need to know (see Table 2); get to the point quickly (see Table 3).

Message Formatting

Formatting can also improve the readability of your materials. Recommendations to improve document readability (CDC, 1999; HHS, 2006; Rudd, 2005) often include the following:

- Use 12- to 14-point type for body text (smaller fonts can be used for details and references).

TABLE 1

Use Active Voice

Original	Revised
These services are provided by a spectrum of environmental health practitioners who work in areas such as indoor and outdoor air quality. . .	A spectrum of environmental health practitioners provide these services. Practitioners work in areas such as indoor and outdoor air quality. . .
Only by developing an integrated pest management (IPM) program can rodents be effectively controlled. IPM is accomplished by conducting the following activities. . .	Rodents can only be effectively controlled through development of an integrated pest management (IPM) program. An IPM program includes five activities. . .

TABLE 2

Include What Readers Need to Know First

Reminder	Rewritten Message
	Use Water for Showers Only
We are bringing potable water into the building that is suitable for showers. For your safety, DO NOT drink the water or use it for brushing your teeth. Please let us know if you need additional bottled water.	Do not drink this water or use it to brush your teeth. Let us know if you need more bottled water for drinking or brushing your teeth.
Thank you	The water we are bringing to the building is only usable for showers.
	Thank you.

TABLE 3

Get to the Point Quickly

	Revised
The course is a basic, all-hazards emergency response training for environmental health professionals.	The course is basic, all-hazards emergency response training for environmental health professionals. After four pilot tests, EHSB plans to offer the course to a broader national audience. [moved up from end of second paragraph]
[paragraph containing details about the first pilot, changes made to the pilot as a result of feedback from the first pilot, details about three more pilots, and future plans to offer pilot nationwide]	EHSB is preparing for a second pilot test of this course and would like your help. We will conduct a practice run of the course in Atlanta on October 16–20, 2006. The practice run will include full course materials with exercises. It will begin on October 16 at 1:00 p.m. and conclude at noon on October 20.
EHSB is in the process of preparing for the second pilot [location and dates for second pilot] and would like your help. To prepare for the second pilot we plan to conduct a practice run in Atlanta, October 16-20, 2006, where a course materials review and evaluation will take place. The practice run will include full course materials with exercises. We are seeking an audience of 30 environmental health professionals with a mix of response experience from the federal, state and local levels to assist in a review and evaluation of the course presentations, materials and exercises.	We are looking for 30 environmental health professionals with a mix of response experience from the federal, state, and local levels to assist in reviewing and evaluating course presentations, materials, and exercises.
[benefit to participants in the practice run]	[benefit to participants in the practice run]
[details about practice run.]	

- Use serif fonts (e.g., Times New Roman, Georgia) for body text.
- Use sans serif fonts (e.g., Arial, Trebuchet, Verdana) for headers.
- Do not use ALL CAPS, *all italics*, or cursive fonts.
- Break up large blocks of text to create short paragraphs or sections with one major idea (see Table 3). Break long paragraph-style lists into bulleted lists (but keep them short; seven bullets at most).
- Group material under descriptive headings to help readers scan for information and separate topics.
- Use appropriate graphics when possible. Be sure any graphics you use match your message. Does the graphic in Figure 1 (on the facing page) match the message? Also note that the message is typed in ALL CAPS and is difficult to read.

Planninig your message—both content and formatting—can help it reach your intended audience.

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