

This Just In...



This Just In... reports are a quick summary of new health marketing and communication research and trends. These brief “nuggets” spotlight new findings with communication practice implications for CDC and its public health partners.

Brought to you by the Strategic and Proactive Communication Branch in the Division of Communication Services, Office of the Associate Director for Communication, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Understanding the utility and application of tailoring messages about health.

Research objective: Tailoring refers to any of a number of methods for creating communications individualized for their receivers, with the expectation that this individualization will lead to larger intended effects. Results so far have been generally positive but not consistently so, and the authors sought to provide a framework to help focus future research on whether tailored messages work and what aspects work best.

Methods: Review of more than 100 studies of tailoring effects.

Findings: The authors identified two overall goals implicitly present in tailored communications: (1) either alter message processing or make message acceptance more likely by addressing cognitive preconditions of processing or acceptance; and (2) focusing efforts on the immediate behavioral determinants of the outcome goal. Given these goals, the authors propose three basic tailoring strategies for achieving these goals: (1) Overt demonstrations or claims of ‘personalization,’ (2) ‘feedback’ to recipients of what is known about them, and (3) ‘content matching’ based on recipients’ personal data.

Personalization: Personalization attempts to increase attention or motivation to process messages by conveying, explicitly or implicitly, that the communication is designed specifically for ‘you.’ Three of the most common personalization tactics are ‘identification’ which recognizes the recipient by name, ‘raising expectation of customization’ involving overt claims of customization (i.e., this was created just for you), and ‘contextualization’ which presents information in a meaningful context.

Feedback: Feedback involves presenting individuals with information about themselves, obtained during assessment or observed elsewhere. Descriptive (reports what is known about the recipient based upon his or her data), comparative (contrasts what is known about the recipient with what is known about others), and evaluative (makes interpretations or judgments based on what is known about the recipient) feedback strategies target psychosocial determinants of health behaviors.

Content Matching: Content matching attempts to direct messages to individuals’ status on key theoretical determinants (knowledge, outcome expectations, normative beliefs, efficacy and/or skills) of the behavior of interest. For any given individual, content matching seeks to act on those intermediate determinants of intentions which are most needed or most likely to produce success.

Practice implications for health marketers and communication professionals:

The authors suggest that tailored health messages may be the most successful if the three tailoring strategies are used in combination—with personalization more often affecting processing goals and feedback and content matching more related to outcomes. In addition, they suggest that future research should focus on how tailoring works (how and why tailoring works, not on whether it does); a better understanding of the relative impact of various tailoring strategies (compare specific tailoring strategies and tactics in their impact on processes and outcomes); and of the impact of individual assessment on tailoring outcomes (understand when and how much assessment impacts processing, intermediate behaviors, and eventual outcomes). For example, consider the following tailored message to promote increased physical activity: “Based on the information you provided (personalization), you are not getting the amount of physical activity recommended by the Surgeon General (descriptive feedback). You mentioned that you would like to be a better role model (descriptive feedback) for your two young children (personalization), but you are having trouble finding the time for regular exercise (descriptive feedback). You also mentioned that you are concerned about getting injured (descriptive feedback) while exercising. Given your concerns about lack of time and potential injury, here is a list of possible strategies that might help you overcome these issues...(content matching).” Various consumer research databases can help identify certain behaviors of targeted audience segments to assist in tailoring your health message for them.

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For additional information, send comments and questions to SPCBHealthMktg@cdc.gov, or contact Lynn Sokler, SPCB, at LSokler@cdc.gov.