

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 Marketing and Communication Strategy Branch in the Division of Health Communication and Marketing, National Center for Health Marketing, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Images accompanying news stories appear to provoke curiosity and increase reading time among consumers

Research objective: It has long been argued that images (e.g., drawings, photographs) can tell stories far better than words. Images are also thought to be lures attracting readers to text information. This study sought to find out if pictures accompanying computer-mediated news stories influence whether people are attracted to a story and how they read a story.

Methods: The amount of time people spent looking at each news story among several stories was precisely recorded using computers. Research participants (192; equally divided between males and females) were randomly assigned to one of four image conditions (text only control, reporter photo, non-threatening or threatening picture) in which they were able to freely select and view several news stories. The news stories text was neutral and held constant across the image conditions.

Findings: The data revealed that the inclusion of photographs on the first page of news stories did influence individuals' interest in the news stories. The stories accompanied by either a picture of the reporter, a non-threatening picture, or a threatening picture resulted in reading times greater than for the same stories without a picture. Further, the type of picture accompanying the news stories influenced whether a person read the story. While non-threatening (e.g., a picture of kids playing on the beach on a sunny day in a story about skin cancer prevention) and threatening (e.g., a close-up photograph of malignant melanoma on an arm in the same story) pictures caused readers to spend more time on the first page, a threatening picture caused readers to spend much more time with the subsequent pages of each story.

There are two important conclusions of this study—(1) there are two distinct components of messages—the images and the text; and (2) the use of graphic, threatening images accompanying neutral messages appears to be a positive in terms of the time spent with an article.

Practice implications for health marketers and communication professionals

Changes in society and technology have altered the way people obtain and use health information. Consumers now frequently use the Internet to seek out health information in addition to expert sources and traditional media. These findings are especially relevant for those developing and designing health messages delivered through computer-mediated media. Specifically, to stimulate readers' initial interest in a neutral health message, consider including a non-threatening or a threatening photograph since they are the same in terms of catching reader interest.

To encourage readers to continue reading a message, think about continuing incorporating threatening images within health promotion and disease prevention messages where appropriate. This research demonstrates that threatening images may not necessarily turn people off as others have speculated, and we shouldn't be afraid to visually show the effects of disease in health messages.

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For additional information, send comments and questions to MCSBHealthMktg@cdc.gov or contact Lynn Sokler, Chief, MCSB, at Lsokler@cdc.gov.