Communicating with the public

Why communicate with the public?

Clear, thoughtful communications around research findings have the potential to increase the perceived value of research among the public and build trust between researchers and society.

There is also the question of impact. Some studies produce findings that are able to inform or empower public audiences to make more informed choices about treatment and care. The effect of this on individuals (eg improve health; develop possession of information that can inform positive choices and empower positive decision making; lessen anxiety) is a powerful outcome from a study, and seeing such impact can be motivating for a research team.

Finally, the kind of profile that can accompany public communication of findings can raise awareness among influencers, stakeholders and funders of a study's findings and of individual researchers. This can help to build a career and bring about positive change in the field.

It should be noted that communicating your findings to public audiences is distinct from **engaging public and patient organisations** to help plan and carry out communications activities.

How to identify your public audiences

In strategic communications terms, 'the public' is not a legitimate target audience for research findings. Identification of potential audiences in such an amorphous way does not provide the focus required to build a successful communications approach.

Instead, it is necessary to identify those people among the public who will – through reasons of experience, existing interests, health conditions, etc – be predisposed to engage with your findings. The **identification of these audiences** – and describing or characterising them – is a process known as audience segmentation.

How to go about it: tips on communicating with the public

- **Narrow down your audiences:** who is it that you need to engage with as a priority? Who will be most interested? Who may benefit the most from your research insights? Focus your communications on this group.

- **Identify how your findings can impact people's lives**: your starting point is understanding your audiences' interest in, or the potential benefit of, your findings to them (eg introducing health coaching to those with long-term conditions). You can then **create messages** that speak to these.

- **Help your audience place the research and its findings in context:** how do the research findings fit into what the audiences may already know about the issue? Are the findings indicating a major change in, or an addition to, an existing body of knowledge?

- **Identify the implications of the findings:** if you do not draw implications from your findings, then others may. What could this affect? What may this change? What are the potential benefits or risks? This can be set within the limitations of the study or highlighting gaps in knowledge or the need for further research.

- **Match your language to the audience:** relay your information and findings in **language** that your target audiences would use. Always avoid jargon.

- **Use the communications channels that your audiences use and trust:** where do they go to receive information? Which channels do they trust? Will this information have a legacy (ie is it likely to remain relevant and be accessed for a number of years)? If so, which is the most relevant and easily accessible repository for the information.

- **Build credibility:** who are your funding sources and partners? Who supports this work and believes in it?

Communicate your research with our toolkit at www.health.org.uk/research-kit

- **Prepare for misinterpretation or detractors:** is it possible to identify areas of your research or findings that could be misinterpreted? Think about how you can counter this in any information you make public. If findings are misinterpreted, act swiftly to correct and supply accurate information.

- **Provide information on what audiences can do next:** if your target audiences are fully engaged by the findings, where can they find more information? What can they do? Who can they contact?

Influencing a public audience: examples

Communicating complex data on children's heart surgery outcomes: creating a channel to allow the exploration and understanding of data

Christina Pagel is an applied mathematician at **University College London's Clinical Operational Research Unit**, researching children's survival after heart surgery. She was part of the team that developed the statistical formulae used by the NHS to evaluate survival data, which has been made available in a public report since 2013. She believes that making data public can only drive accountability and improvement if the data are also understandable. Christina and the team, with funding from the National Institute for Health Research, set out to develop a website for a lay audience to be able to understand and interpret the published survival data.

- Recognising that significant resource would be required, the team applied for additional funding for their research communications. Their funder was not only open to the idea, but also encouraged them further to involve the target audience in the development of the website.

- Partnerships were forged with experts in communicating data, building websites and the charity **Sense about Science**, which specialises in responsible reporting of scientific evidence in the media.

- An iterative approach was taken to the development of the website, with considerable time and effort put into listening to users and testing.

- The success of the project depended on using the right language to present abstract and complex concepts to the public. It was recognised that the target audience could be engaging with the site at a time of anxiety – and the language and accessibility needed to accommodate this.

- Although it was recognised that building a website would be an unusual channel for the research team to use, the clear advantages that it offered – providing an accessible, searchable resource for current and future users plus allowing for annual updates of data – meant that the team were clear that this was the right channel to use.

UbbLE (UK Longevity Explorer): managing the release of potentially sensationalist data from the UK Biobank

In 2015, Andrea Ganna and Erik Ingelsson (**Karolinska Institute**) used innovative, interactive technology to communicate the results of their study of around 500,000 UK Biobank participants into five-year mortality predictors. Via a website called **UbbLE (the UK Longevity Explorer)**, members of the public were able to answer a set of questions that were then used to predict their individual risk of dying within the next five years. There was a risk of misinterpretation and sensationalism surrounding the release of these data; therefore the communications around UbbLE – how it presented the data and how it was launched to the public – needed to be handled with particular sensitivity and clarity.

- Ganna and Ingelsson sought funding to create UbbLE, and developed a partnership with **Sense about Science** – specialists in the communication of complex scientific research.

- As proxy representatives for the public, communications officers from major UK health bodies and charities were consulted to bring their own experience on the communication of sensitive health data.

- The **Science Media Centre** advised on and hosted the press launch of UbbLE – ensuring that comprehensive, accurate information was available for journalists.

- Sense about Science took advice on the wording and visuals for the risk calculator from experts in risk communication for public groups, the **Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication**)

- The website had 1.5 million visitors on the day of launch, with this rising to more than 4 million just a month after launch. It achieved widespread coverage in national and international media. Some of the charities involved in giving user feedback wrote blog posts about the new website for their audiences.

Resources

- The Science Media Centre provides a bridge between scientists and the media, and **offers advice and tips for media work**.

- Sense about Science is a charity with a public engagement team that **helps scientists to communicate difficult research findings** simply and accurately.

- The National Institutes of Health provide **a checklist for communicating science and health research to the public**.