The Art and Science of Communicating about Vaccines: A Behavioral Science Toolbox

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Why Behavioral Science?
**Outline**

**Behaviors** are shaped by a complex combination of elements

- Perceptions
- Attitudes & beliefs
- Learned experiences

Social networks
Environmental influences

Provide 8 tips based upon behavioral science principles that are designed to improve communication about vaccines

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**#1 - Perceptions ARE Reality**

People’s **subjective** experiences and interpretations of the world shapes their ‘reality,’ which

- Is filtered through individual biases and mental models
- Can influence attitudes and behaviors
- Can be swayed by external factors such as social norms
- Does not always reflect scientific objectivity

Result is that people can sometimes misinterpret or misunderstand information and base their actions on their **perceived reality**
**Question**

What are the perceptions about ___?

**Application**

• Assess the relevant perceptions and the potential influence on behavior

**Caveat**

• Approach a person’s perceived reality critically and with awareness that perceptions may not be easily changed

#2 - Risk is Subjective!

To take action, a person needs to feel susceptible or at risk. With no perceived risk, people often do not believe they need to take action – and don’t!

There is virtually no correlation between the ranking of a risk or threat by experts and the ranking of those same threats by the public.
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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Caveat</th>
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</table>
| What is the person’s *perceived* risk of contracting a disease? | • Educate about the potential consequences of contracting a disease  
• Enhance perceptions of risk | • Your perceptions of risk and what is important may not match other’s perceptions  
• Other issues may be more salient and compete for attention, which can affect risk perceptions |

**#3 - Facts Alone are Rarely Sufficient for Change**

Factual information *can help* when basic knowledge is absent  
• What vaccines are recommended  
• When  
• Where they are available

Factual information can have *little influence* when it  
• Contradicts current understanding  
• Challenges deeply held ideologies  
• Conflicts with strong emotional attachment to beliefs
<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What “facts” are needed and relevant to take action?</td>
<td>• Provide information to fill information deficits</td>
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<td>Is basic knowledge absent?</td>
<td>• Emphasize other factors to influence behaviors</td>
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<td>Where are they learning their “facts”?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Basic information, even if missing, may not be helpful if other factors are at play</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Avoid using facts alone to counter strongly held convictions</td>
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**#4 - Don’t say “Just do it”**

Telling a person ‘what to do’ is rarely effective. When the person is **actively involved** in the decision, behavior change is more likely. And most adults prefer to be **self-directed**.

Giving directions:
- Can be seen as overly directive
- Don’t address underlying factors
- Discount existing knowledge or past experiences

Consider providing a **rationale or explanation** for the behavior.

Assess and understand the **outcomes** associated with the behavior.
What are the potential explanations that might make a difference?

What outcomes are associated with the behavior?

**Application**

- Use a call to action such as ‘talk to your provider’ to empower individuals
- Pair a statement with an explanation of why or what could happen
- Use knowledge about outcomes to shift the ‘decisional balance’

**Caveat**

- Most behaviors have perceived positive and negative outcomes – assess the weight or importance of each

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**More about Outcomes**

People tend to weigh the various positive and negative outcomes. The importance associated with the outcomes will help explain behavior.

![Diagram](Protector.png)

*Protects my baby!*

Feel bad afterwards
Risk of side effects

Vaccine
Weighing of Outcomes

What is important to one person may not be to another.

Hurts
Inconvenient
Might make me sick
Has major side effects

Protects against illness

#5 - Influencers are not just Social Media Stars

Theories suggest that people have relevant significant others who influence their attitudes and behaviors.

Significant others:
• Differ according to the behavior
• May provide opposing advice
• Vary in their degree of influence
#6 – Communities & Social Networks Influence How People See the World

People’s day to day **experiences** and **social networks** create, maintain and reinforce attitudes & opinions

- Individuals tend to self-select into networks consistent with their beliefs
- Social networks specify what is appropriate and expected
- People often shift beliefs, sometimes unconsciously, to match others in their group
- These networks, along with their environment, help shape norms and culture
- Learned experiences are powerful teachers
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| What is a person’s social network and community? What are they exposed to and learning? Do they see and hear alternative views? | • Enlist (or even hire!) the help of respected community members  
• Set modest goals and slowly chip away at beliefs |

<table>
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</table>
| • Insular community members may be resistant to alternative views  
• If a person has limited exposure to alternative views, change will take significant effort and time |

**#7 - One size DOESN’T fit all!**

Understand your audience and their specific concerns and needs by splitting them into meaningful groups by attitudes and behaviors. **Behavioral segmentation** helps identify groups on which to focus:

• Who’s doing it  
• Who’s considering  
• Who’s opposed

This understanding can increase the potential impact of communication for behavior change.
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<td>Which groups are the most likely to change their attitudes and beliefs? What are the motivators and barriers to vaccination?</td>
<td>• Assess and tailor messages to specific behaviors and beliefs</td>
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</table>
| • Important to base your messages on information and data
| • Pretesting messages should be standard practice. Not doing so risks:  
  - little or no influence  
  - unintended effects |

#8 – Be Specific! It Matters!

Behaviors can best be predicted and understood when they are very specific and precisely defined.

Important to specify:

• Who?
• What behaviors?
• When?
• Under what circumstances?
### Who?
- Your child
- Yourself
  - Age
  - Have a chronic condition

### What behaviors?
- Flu vaccine vs MMR vs Tdap
- Brand of COVID-19 vaccine

### When?
- Routine visit vs sick visit
- Seasonal
- During pregnancy

### Under what circumstances?
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Context</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary care provider</td>
<td>Free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>Vaccine shortage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop-up Clinic</td>
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### Conclusion
- Remember that **not everyone** thinks like you do!
- Prioritize your audiences through strategic **behavioral** segmentation
- Assess their **specific** concerns and beliefs
- Apply **behavioral science principles** to guide communication
- Understand learned experiences from the audiences’ **social networks** and **community norms**
- **Pretest** messages to improve relevance and impact
- Be **realistic** about what communication can and cannot do
Thank you
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