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DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN





WHY?

In substance use prevention

MESSAGES MATTER.

Communications planning starts with identifying the problem you are trying to solve and taking time to get to know your audience.



STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR GOAL

DECIDE

Decide what knowledge, attitudes, or behavior you are seeking from your audience.

QUESTION

Are you trying to:

- Encourage healthy choices and refusal of substances?
- Gain public or stakeholder support for substance use prevention?
- Generate peer-to-peer conversations about preventing substance use?

Once you know what you want out of your prevention communications, get to know your audience.



STEP 2: KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

DEFINE

Clearly define your audience(s). Think about who needs to receive your message for the goal to be achieved.

You may have more than one audience. If middle school students are the intended audience for your prevention goal, what other groups may need to receive your message to reinforce your message to youth? School staff? Caregivers? Others?

UNDERSTAND

Take time to understand your audience(s) so that you can create the most effective plan for reaching and relating to them. Determine what actions and/or attitudes you are trying to elicit and ask:

- What factors will make it more likely they will react this way?
- What will make it less likely they will react this way?

Identify the most effective way to reach your audience. Consider:

- What communications methods do they use most often?
- What will make it most likely they will pay attention to the message?
- What are your audience's most relevant identities and/or affiliations to which you can tailor your message?



EXAMPLE OF HOW TO USE THIS SKILL

TRANSLATION INTO ACTION

IDENTIFY YOUR GOAL

Prevent and reduce substance use in ABC County Middle School students.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

ABC County Middle School Audiences	Students	Teachers	Caregivers
Action(s) they need to take:	Make the choice to engage in healthy activities and not use substances.	Support students/children in making healthy choices and not using substances.	
What will encourage them to act this way?	Knowing that most students choose healthy activities and do not use substances.	Value of supporting student well-being in all aspects of health and safety.	Desire for children to make healthy choices and live healthy lives.
What will make it less likely they will act this way?			
What communication channel is the most effective way to reach them?			
What message features will engage them?			
What identities and/or affiliations are most relevant to this audience?			

Continue answering these questions specific to your audiences. Focus groups with your audiences can help provide the answers to these questions.

HOW?

Write down your identified goal (i.e., what you are aiming to achieve) through your prevention communications.

Establish objectives, the steps required for the goal to be completed.

Transform your goal and objectives into S.M.A.R.T. goals and objectives by making sure they reflect these 5 characteristics.

S

Specific

State specifically what you are trying to accomplish.

M

Measurable

Specify how you will measure progress towards your goal. Be clear about the measures you will use and your performance target.

A

Achievable

Consider whether the objective is realistically possible to accomplish using the resources available.

R

Relevant

State the relevance of your objective to substance use prevention.

T

Time-bound

Be specific and realistic about when goals and objectives will be complete.

EXAMPLE

EXAMPLE GOAL:

Implement a 4-month social norms campaign to prevent onset or escalation of substance use among middle school students in ABC County Middle School.

EXAMPLE OBJECTIVES:

- Identify the true, positive substance use norms of ABC County Middle School students by having students complete an anonymous survey at the start of the semester.
- Disseminate the true, positive norms of ABC County Middle School students by posting posters reflecting these norms throughout campus for the duration of the semester. Track number of posters, locations, and duration of posting.
- Reinforce the true, positive norms through conversations by providing ABC County Middle School teachers and caregivers guidance on how to talk to youth about these norms. Track guidance provided and survey teachers/parents following the campaign about any conversations they had.
- Re-assess substance use among ABC County Middle School exposed to the campaign at 6 and 12 months after campaign completion.



STEP 3: BE STRATEGIC

Ready to ensure your prevention communications have the greatest impact in preventing substance use?

Continue your communications planning process by ensuring your message and how it's delivered are **strategic** and **do no harm**.

Check out this video for an introduction on communicating prevention in ways that work.

The video player shows a red play button icon in the top left corner. The title 'Communicating Prevention in Ways That Work' is displayed in large, light blue and white text. Below the title is the ADAPT logo, which features a stylized tree with green and yellow leaves and the text 'ADAPT A Division for Advancing Prevention & Treatment'. At the bottom of the player, there is a progress bar showing '0:01 / 5:13' and various control icons including play, volume, and settings.

STRATEGIZE

Create messaging that is **relatable** and **persuasive** to your audience. Does your message:

- Capture and maintain their attention?
- Make clear the action you want them to take?
- Connect that action to what matters to them?
- Dismiss natural barriers against acting this way?
- Make this action socially appealing?
- Reflect the positive social norm in the community?
- Focus on the positive rather than the negative?
- Use language and images that promote autonomy and choice?
- Reference sources perceived to be credible, appealing, and influential?

Having Conversations with Youth?



Time your message for success.

- Have frequent, small conversations.
- Bring up the topic when youth are not distracted.
- Avoid conversations during moments of heightened emotion.

Deliver your message with care.

- Listen and engage closely.
- Take time to establish trust.
- Be respectful and collaborative.
- Respect that their choices are theirs to make.



STEP 4: DO NO HARM & DO WHAT WORKS

AVOID

Avoid strategies that do not work or could be harmful.

Fear-based messaging. Fear is a destabilizing emotion. Scare tactics and fear-based messages are not only ineffective but can increase substance use as a way of coping with anxiety caused by these messages and/or in an attempt to restore a sense of control over what might happen if someone does choose to use.

Substance-endorsing messages. Steer clear of direct (language) or indirect (design, image) messages that glamorize substance use or minimize its impact.

Testimonials and lectures. Personal testimonies about the negative impact of substance use and lectures aimed at convincing someone substance use is wrong can unintentionally normalize substance use and do not prepare youth to refute substances.

Information sharing. Information only approaches do not ensure the recipient will understand the information, learning anything from that information, or even accept it as true.

Simple refusal such as “just say no” or “don’t do it.” These messages do not prepare youth with the necessary social skills needed to effectively refuse offers of substances.

Stigmatizing language. Avoid words like “vulnerable,” “high-risk,” and “underserved.” Instead, try phrases like “individuals with elevated risk” and “priority populations.”

Individualism and otherism. Avoid describing substance use and its consequences as the result of good or bad personal choices (e.g., “You can do anything if you try hard enough.”) Also avoid the tendency to group people into “us vs. them” categories (e.g., “You would never want to be like them, would you?”)

ADOPT

Adopt strategies shown to be effective towards your goals.

Positive social norms. Dispel misconceptions that “most youth use substances” by sharing data supporting the positive norms that most youth make healthy choices and do not use substances.

Education. Education requires use of effective teaching strategies to impart knowledge and ensure youth acquire that knowledge in a way that increases understanding. Incorporate active learning by having students engage in interactive learning through activities such as group work, collaborative learning, discussion, and reflection.

Multi-component messaging and prevention approaches. Increase the impact of your messaging by using multiple approaches (e.g., conversations and mass media) and engaging multiple stakeholders (e.g., youth, caregivers, teachers, etc.). Be sure your messaging approach is one part of a larger, more comprehensive prevention strategy.

Tailored messaging. Ensure the message is appropriate for the intended audience and tailored to their age, developmental level, and culture. For example, start messaging to youth about substances at the age of typical initiation (around 12 years old). Messaging to younger children should focus on higher level safety concepts (e.g., taking vitamins to keep healthy, taking only medications prescribed for you, avoiding harmful and toxic substances such as cleaning products).

Relevant messaging. When messaging to youth, focus on immediate, short-term consequences that are important and relevant to them.

Set clear expectations. Youth need to hear from caregivers and trusted adults that substance use is not acceptable for youth at any age.

Use person-first language. Put people before problems they may be experiencing (e.g., “a kid who uses drugs” rather than “a druggie”).



STEP 5: EVALUATE AND ADJUST

Prevention communications can have both intended and unintended effects. Take time during the planning phase to identify **how** you will measure these impacts by creating an evaluation plan.

To study the impact of your messaging, it is important to evaluate both how the messaging was created and delivered (i.e., the process) and the impact the message had in changing perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (i.e., the outcome).

Process measures typically measure the progress and productivity of the messaging strategy.

- Reach measures the extent to which the message reached the intended audience (e.g., number of messages disseminated, number of youth who received the message, verbal and nonverbal acknowledgement of a message)
- Exposure measures how many times the message was received (e.g., number of times the message was seen/heard)
- Fidelity refers to the extent to which the message strategy was implemented as planned (e.g., number of planned and unplanned activities)

Outcome measures assess the effectiveness of the message. This includes evaluating the message content (i.e., what was directly and indirectly communicated) and the resulting impact of your message on your intended audience.

MESSAGE CONTENT

There are four main qualities of an effective message. Ask yourself the following questions to see how effective your communication was at sharing the intended message.

SIMPLICITY

- Does my audience understand the purpose of the message (e.g., to inform, to persuade to act a certain way, etc.)?
- Is the core message clear (or did the receiver get lost in less relevant information)?

SPECIFICITY

- Is the language and design specific to the intended message?
- Is the message understood in ways other than as intended?

STRUCTURE

- Is the message structured in a way that effectively communicates the intended message?
- Is there a more effective way to structure the message content to increase its impact?

STICKINESS

- Did the message resonate with the intended audience?
- Did the audience consume any of the message?
- Did the audience engage with the information in some way?

MESSAGE IMPACT

This measures whether the message made a difference in changing the audience's perceptions, attitudes, and/or behaviors. Common measures include:

- Changes in awareness and knowledge about substances
- Changes in attitudes towards substances and substance use
- Changes in perceptions of social norms surrounding substance use
- Changes in intentions to change behavior
- Changes in the initiation or frequency of substance use
- Increased engagement in healthy activities and/or use of refusal skills

EVALUATION DESIGN

Best practices for determining the impact of prevention communications is to collect information before and after a messaging intervention. Visit the [Substance Use Prevention Communications Toolkit](#) for a synthesis of key guidance on evaluation design

Engage your intended audience throughout the evaluation process.

- Can you collect information from your audience before your message is delivered? If so, you may want to collect baseline data using your impact measures before the message is delivered and then again 6- 12 months later.
- Ideally you would collect data from the same subset of your intended audience both before and after the messaging intervention.
- If tracking the same subset of your audience is not feasible, try to collect baseline and follow-up data from samples of your intended audience.

ADJUST

The 'Adjust' phase of the evaluation plan is a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process. Continuous quality improvement refers to ongoing evaluation of communications activities with the goal of tweaking these activities as needed along the way in order to maximize impact. Key questions to ask during the CQI process are:

- How are we doing? Are we having the intended impact?
- Can we be doing better? How so?
- Can we be more effective or efficient? How so?

Based on your evaluation activities, determine how you might need to adjust your message content or delivery mechanism. For example, you need to:

- Take a step back and re-engage your audience to help create the message in a way that it will be perceived as simple, specific, structured, and sticky.
- Determine more effective communication channels to reach and expose your audience to the message.
- Re-design your approach to evaluating impact.

Once revisions have been made to the approach or message content, be sure to implement with a plan to continue to evaluate and adjust as necessary to increase your likelihood of achieving the desired impact.

P L A N N I N G



STEP 6: DEVELOP A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Communications planning starts with **identifying the problem** you are trying to solve and taking time to get to **know your audience**. Next comes developing an approach that is **strategic** and **does no harm**. The final step is to **evaluate** whether your messaging is having an impact and **adjusting** your message or message delivery to increase the effectiveness of your communication.

Use the template below to start generating your communications plan:

Identify your goal	Decide what knowledge, attitudes, and/or behaviors you are seeking from your audience. Then generate your goal and create S.M.A.R.T. objectives.	
Know your audience	Take time to understand your audience(s) to create the most effective plan for reaching and relating to them.	
Be strategic	Create messaging that is relatable and persuasive to your audience. Time messages for success and deliver them with care.	
Do no harm	Avoid strategies that do not work or could be harmful. Instead, adopt strategies that are effective.	
Evaluate	Determine the impact of your message by planning for how you will evaluate your messaging strategy and its outcomes.	
Adjust	Plan for ongoing evaluation of communications activities so that you can adjust along the way to maximize impact.	

RESOURCES



COMMUNICATION PLANNING

- CDC's School-Based HIV/STD Prevention Communication Toolkit [Module 1: Communication Planning and Health Communications Tools](#).
- Community Tool Box's Chapter on [Communications to Promote Interest](#) offers a section on [Developing a Plan for Communication](#).
- CDC's [SMART Objectives Template](#).
- Sign up to receive Forthright Advising's [Guide to Nonprofit Communications Campaigns](#) for additional information on communication planning in the context of a communication campaign.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

- Community Tool Box's Chapter on [Communications to Promote Interest](#) offers a section on [Using Principles of Persuasion](#).
- SAMHSA's [Resource Guide](#) on using language to overcome stigma and end discrimination.
- Article: [Drug Education Best Practice for Health, Community and Youth workers: A Practical and Accessible Toolkit](#).
- ADAPT Technical Webinar on [What Works \(and Doesn't\) in Substance Use Prevention](#).
- CDC's Health Literacy resource on [Developing and Testing Materials](#).

EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATIONS

- CDC's [Evaluating Communication Campaigns](#), [Clear Communication Index](#), and [Continuous Quality Improvement](#) resources.
- Study.com's [Message Evaluation Strategies](#).
- ADAPT Technical Webinars on [Program Planning and Evaluation](#).

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