

Effective Strategies to Encourage COVID-19 Prevention Behaviors

Research suggests that CDC messaging in April 2020 led to large significant changes in mask wearing (+12 percentage points) and mask buying (+7 percentage points). These results underline the importance and impact of high-level leadership and communication.¹ Yet, not all messages and approaches have proven effective in translating actual change in attitudes and behaviors.²

This rapid review is not meant to be exhaustive or a formal evidence review, but a quick turnaround effort to share insights on what works to promote healthy behaviors, as relevant in the effort to combat COVID-19. These insights come from previous research on decision making and behavior change in other contexts, and more recent evaluations in the specific context of the COVID-19 crisis. The document includes relevant evidence on the message and the format.

Make an Effective Appeal for Behavior Change

Highlight that large or growing numbers of people are acting to reduce the spread of the virus³

- Highlight that many Americans — or members of a state, local, or other community — are wearing masks, distancing or avoiding family gatherings around the holidays to reduce spread of the virus. Refer to a specific state, local, or smaller community whenever possible.
- In a recent survey, 92% of Americans said they always or sometimes wear a mask.⁴
- Don't draw attention to the fact that some people are not wearing masks or taking other harmful steps, as this can be counterproductive. If the number of people who are taking action (like mask wearing) is not impressive, consider highlighting that the number is growing.⁵

Connect prevention behaviors to people's identities

- Connecting a behavior to someone's identity is important when the behavior is difficult or burdensome. Associate health behaviors like handwashing and mask wearing with a valued identity.⁶ For example, "I'm a Midwesterner, and Midwestern nice is washing your hands."
- Highlighting bipartisan support for COVID-19-related measures can reduce polarization and biased reasoning.

Empower people

- Couple messages about the harm of the virus with how to mitigate the risk of contracting COVID-19.⁷ Consider including locations to pick up available masks or steps they can take now to ensure they are prepared for thanksgiving. Give clear steps to take action.

Keep it simple

- Avoid information overload. Package messages clearly and concisely (eg: 3-4 bullet points).

¹ Goldberg, Matthew H., et al. (2020). Mask-wearing increased after a government recommendation: A natural experiment in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic. *PsyArXiv*, 20 Apr. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/uc8nz>.

² NASEM (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine). (2016). *Science Literacy: Concepts, Contexts, and Consequences*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/23595>

³ Schultz, P. W., Nolan, J. M., Cialdini, R. B., Goldstein, N. J., & Griskevicius, V. (2007). The Constructive, Destructive, and Reconstructive Power of Social Norms. *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 429–434. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01917.x>

⁴ National Geographic. (2020). [Poll finds more Americans than ever think we should wear masks](#). 5 October 2020.

⁵ Sparkman, G., & Walton, G. M. (2017). Dynamic Norms Promote Sustainable Behavior, Even if It Is Counternormative. *Psychological Science*, 28(11), 1663–1674. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617719950>

⁶ NASEM. (2020). [Encouraging Adoption of Protective Behaviors to Mitigate the Spread of COVID-19: Strategies for Behavior Change](#). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25881>

⁷ NASEM. (2020).

- People read only 20% of website text.⁸ Social media platforms count three seconds as an ad “view,” and many public relations companies plan for less than 10 seconds of viewing.⁹

Motivate Caring

Appeal to the common good and to protecting one’s community

- “Take care of Georgia” and “Stay safe Brooklyn” appeal to social responsibility and to protecting the local economy, healthcare workers, or vulnerable community members. Make the messages local by including an image of a healthcare worker from a local known hospital or statistics from a specific zip code.¹⁰
- A message of duty was found effective at increasing the number of people who recalled they should keep their distance to protect other people in a store from coronavirus.¹¹

Use concrete stories about the dangers of the virus and focus on identifiable victims

- Instead of citing statistics or describing the large scale of the public health crisis, highlight specific stories of individuals who have died and families who have suffered. Connect to one’s community, where possible.
- Lead the audience to think of a specific victim or individual at risk — for example, a grandparent, a parent, or a well-known community member. Focusing on these identifiable individuals can be effective, and adding in statements about statistics can actually reduce the effectiveness of the message.

Select an Effective Messenger and Format

The messenger matters: use messengers trusted by the target audience

- Trust in the messenger, whether an individual or a credible source, is often more powerful than the content of the message itself. Targeting well-connected individuals and making their behavior change visible and salient to others through social media channels and other communication media can be a promising strategy.¹²

Use strong visuals — which can be as effective as text

- The City of Portland partnered with the Behavioral Insights Team to improve COVID-19 messaging. One study found that sharing visuals alone without text achieved equal comprehension and intention, and that descriptive images can be as effective as text.¹³ As an example, the number of deaths could be visually represented by recognizable stadiums (“More than six Wrigley Fields”).

Tailor the framing of the message to the audience

- Segmenting messages for different populations (whether by level of misinformation, level of risk, where they get their information, what choices they make, current sickness, or other factors) is critical.¹⁴

⁸ Nielsen, Jakob. (2008). How Little Do Users Read? Available at: <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/>

⁹ Stokes, Rob. (2018). *eMarketing: The essential guide to marketing in a digital world*. 6th Edition. Red & Yellow Creative Schools of Business.

¹⁰ NASEM. (2020).

¹¹ City of Portland. (2020). “Behavioral Insights and Testing Outcomes.”

www.portland.gov/what-works-cities/behavioral-insights-and-testing

¹² NASEM. (2020).

¹³ City of Portland. 2020.

¹⁴ NASEM. (2020).

Additional resources

COVID Risk Assessment toolkit (WHO) – includes interview questions to assess communities' knowledge, attitude, and perceptions about COVID: [Risk Communication and Community Engagement \(RCCE\) Action Plan Guidance COVID-19 Preparedness and Response](#)

COVID-19 text message library (WHO): [COVID-19 SMS message library](#)

State COVID-19 policy database: [COVID-19 US state policy database \(CUSP\)](#)¹⁵

¹⁵ Raifman J, Nocka K, Jones D, Bor J, Lipson S, Jay J, and Chan P. (2020). COVID-19 US state policy database. Available at: www.tinyurl.com/statepolicies