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Using New Technologies to Communicate Environmental Health



Editor's Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, NEHA has teamed up with the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) to publish a column in the *Journal*. AAS is an organization that “elevates the standards, improves the practice, advances the professional proficiency, and promotes the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” Membership with AAS is based upon meeting certain high standards and criteria, and AAS members represent a prestigious list of environmental health professionals from across the country.

Through the column, information from different AAS members who are subject-matter experts with knowledge and experience in a multitude of environmental health topics will be presented to the *Journal's* readership. This column strengthens the ties between both associations in the shared purposes of furthering and enhancing the environmental health profession.

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Environmental health practitioners are often acutely aware of the compelling need to tell the story of what we do and why we do it. Historically, our profession has not been particularly effective in describing to others how environmental complexities affect personal and community health, and how this profession works with individuals, communities, and policy makers to reduce or eliminate environmental

health hazards. Perhaps it is time to revitalize our modes of outreach and consider how the environmental health profession can best make use of new technologies to become the professional narrators we need to be.

Communication is a core interpersonal and professional skill, and is an essential requisite for environmental health. This concept is not new. Almost a dozen years ago, Mor-

rone and co-authors (2005) explained that when it comes to environmental health, the purpose of communication is to increase the visibility of this science and improve the public's awareness and understanding of the role played by the environmental health profession in protecting the public's health. In other words, our collective dialogue and outreach are essential to “sell” what we do in environmental health. We should consider our every job encounter as a way to obtain buy in and to foster positive views of environmental health departments, professionals, and activities in our communities. We need to consider how to think more clearly about our professional competencies and illustrate our professional responsibilities to others in a way that is targeted, personal, and understandable.

While environmental health practitioners are well versed in the biological sciences, the nuances of social sciences, public relations, and image management tend to be lost in the hierarchy of our technical job competencies. Albert Einstein once reflected that most of the fundamental ideas of science are essentially simple and may, as a rule, be expressed in a language comprehensible to everyone (BrainyQuote, 2016). Unfortunately, in the course of our environmental health duties, we don't always present science-related topics to nonexperts in a clear and graspable way.

The public we are trying to reach isn't always just one person or a singular community. Looking at the depth and breadth of our communities, cultural and linguistic variations can factor into an audience's percep-

tion of a message. In addition, every person has their own set of schema or background knowledge that forms the lens in how they receive and interpret information. Environmental health challenges are often complex, but in contrast, our core community messages should be simply phrased. It is essential that our messages are capable of being repeatedly marketed and presented to others in a variety of ways and formats in order to reach people on a level that is both understandable and relatable.

Environmental health outreach is a dynamic process. How we connect and correspond with the public needs to adapt to the way people, communications, technologies, and pop culture change. Consider over the past century how the transfer of information radically morphed with the wide usage of radio and television, and in more recent decades, with expansion of the Internet, e-mail, cable TV, and the demise of print newspapers. The widespread use of smartphones and texting, as well as the social media explosion, has changed the way the world sends and receives information. In discussing this transmission view of communication, Rimal and Lapinski (2009) advise that we think carefully about the channels “through which intervention messages are disseminated, to whom the message is attributed, and how audience members respond and the features of messages that have the greatest impact” (p. 247).

As we look at our environmental health messages, consider the take away. Is the purpose of the communiqué awareness, action, or something else? How the outreach is framed, and the mode of distribution, has a tremendous impact on effectiveness. As a country, we are so inundated with information that grabbing an audience’s attention is difficult. In 2015, Microsoft released a research report that discussed people’s decreasing attention span, presumably due to information overload. According to the report, the average human attention span has dwindled from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8 seconds in 2013 (Microsoft, 2015). It also interestingly noted that the average attention span of a goldfish is 9 seconds.

An elevator speech has traditionally been considered the briefest form of extending to others a glimpse of what we do in environmental health. These days, would you be able to capably capture your message in the

140-character limit of Twitter? To be most effective, environmental health professionals need to enhance their competencies in new types of dialogue, as well as utilize effective, older approaches.

No matter the mode of communication—face to face, written word, ads, videos, press releases, and now Internet-based methodologies—it is essential to research and understand how people synthesize information. Disseminating information on an impending hurricane (risk communication) needs a different touch than promoting handwashing as a means to prevent the flu. Frequency of messaging also comes into play. Marketing professionals tout the “Rule of 7,” suggesting audiences need to hear or see a message 7 times before it makes a positive impact. Surely, environmental health can benefit from a clearly defined communications strategy, but where to start?

At least one baseline roadmap to upgrading environmental health outreach already exists. In 2011, the American Public Health Association collaborated with the Frameworks Institute to “uncover new ways to communicate about environmental health that resonate with the public and engage people in productive policy discussions (Krisberg, 2015).” The resulting resource, *Framing Environmental Health*, offers environmental health practitioners new strategies for talking about their work and its connection to healthy communities (Frameworks Institute, 2016).

On a local front, engaging in the explosion of social media platforms is essential, as the Internet is a powerful medium to distribute and amplify messages. Understand, however, that social media is so much more expansive than Facebook and Twitter. Limiting environmental health messages to these two sites restricts outreach performance. Look beyond to other existing and emerging electronic platforms to enhance the delivery of environmental health information. Consider applications such as LinkedIn, Google+, Pinterest, Tumblr, Wikipedia, YouTube, Yelp, Flickr, Snapchat, Instagram, Second Life, WordPress, and ZoomInfo. Engaging the public with such communication tools can serve as an effective podium to broadcast and amplify core environmental health messages.

Keep adapting the environmental health message. Remember people’s 8-second attention span. Try mixing up your outreach by

Additional Resources

- **Promoting Environmental Health in Communities: Talking Points**
www.atsdr.cdc.gov/emes/public/docs/PEHC%20Talking%20Points%20for%20Specific%20Populations.pdf
- **Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication**
<https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc>

creating environmental health messages in different and engaging formats, such as infographics, memes, GIFs, visuals, movies, music, and apps. Explore uses of technology to reach communities and stakeholders, and to make environmental health communications targeted, impactful, and beneficial to your audience.

Most of our agencies are limited on staff, dollars, and time. Regardless, communication and outreach can be augmented with a little creativity. Try partnering with health educators, public information officers, or departments in your organization to identify and foster coordinated outreach. Provide internship opportunities for students studying fields such as marketing, communications, and public relations to create an outreach plan. Look to organizations, such as NEHA, for key messages and ideas on how to distribute them.

So, what is your call to action? Integrating outreach and communication strategies into your environmental health program provides a playbook for multimodal communication, helps with community relations, and assists in the popularization, outreach, and respect for environmental health. As those working in environmental health can benefit from best practices or examples of effective environmental health communication, please share your experiences with NEHA and the American Academy of Sanitarians at <https://twitter.com/nehorg> and <https://twitter.com/AASanitarians>. 🐬

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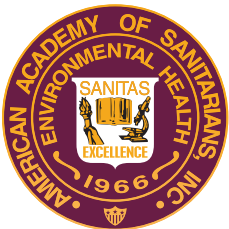
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Did You Know?

Students enrolled in a National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council-accredited academic program are eligible for the National Environmental Public Health Internship Program at approved local and state health departments or agencies. Students will be exposed to the exciting career opportunities, challenges, and benefits of working in environmental health agencies throughout the U.S. The application process will open December 15, 2016. Learn more at www.neha.org/internships.

DAVIS CALVIN WAGNER SANITARIAN AWARD



The American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) announces the annual Davis Calvin Wagner Award. The award will be presented by AAS during the National Environmental Health Association's (NEHA's) 2017 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition. The award consists of an individual plaque and a perpetual plaque that is displayed in NEHA's office lobby.

Nominations for this award are open to all AAS diplomates who:

1. Exhibit resourcefulness and dedication in promoting the improvement of the public's health through the application of environmental and public health practices.
2. Demonstrate professionalism, administrative and technical skill, and competence in applying such skills to raise the level of environmental health.
3. Continue to improve through involvement in continuing education type programs to keep abreast of new developments in environmental and public health.
4. Are of such excellence to merit AAS recognition.

NOMINATIONS MUST BE RECEIVED BY APRIL 15, 2017.

Nomination packages should be sent electronically to shep1578@gmail.com. If desired, three hard copies of the nomination document may be submitted to

American Academy of Sanitarians
 c/o Craig A. Shepherd
 1271 Statesville Road
 Watertown, TN 37184

For more information about the award nomination, eligibility, evaluation process, and previous recipients of the award, please visit sanitarians.org/awards.