

How to Develop Effective Mass Communication Messages

Susan Morgan, Ph.D.
Communication Department
University of Kentucky

Introduction

Many people who have experience constructing campaign messages already have an intuitive knowledge of what works and what doesn't, especially if they have been working with a particular population for a long time. However, it may be helpful to outline a few principles that are derived from mass communication theory and theories of social influence. Following these principles should lead to more persuasive campaign messages.

Message Design Principles

To create messages for ROPS and seat belt promotion that align with theoretical and empirical research, some common elements should be attended to.

1. Stories - Most people prefer to read campaign information in narrative form. Wherever possible, use real or fictional stories that illustrate real situations, actions, and consequences.
2. Fear Messages - Create a sense of fear by focusing on the losses or negative consequences that will result if audience members do not adopt a ROPS and seatbelt. Although many people consider fear/loss appeals to be a "negative" way to convey a message (preferring instead to adopt a more "upbeat" and positive message that emphasizes what can be gained by "doing the right thing"), there is ample evidence that fear appeals are effective.
3. Two Types of Efficacy - It is critical to remember that creating fear alone will actually produce a boomerang effect. It is extremely important that fear messages tell readers or listeners how they can

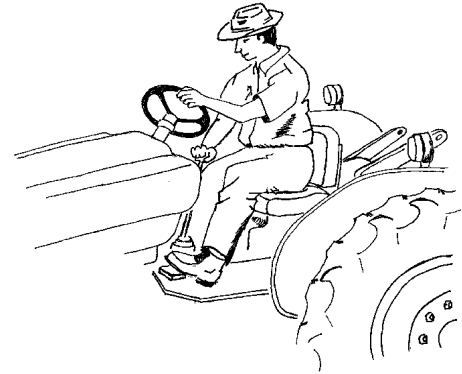
avoid the negative consequences described in a PSA or message staffer. Efficacy takes two forms: action efficacy and self-efficacy. In other words, you must persuade your audience that the action you recommend will produce the desired effect AND exactly how they can perform that protective action. (Alternatively, you can remind them that they already know how to perform the action.)

4. Address Barriers - Give audience members information that will help them overcome the barriers associated with the adoption of a ROPS and seatbelt. This can be done in a "linear" fashion (providing straightforward information) or through the use of narrative. There are many possible barriers that are best discovered through formative research (talking to real farmers and their families to find out what has kept them from buying and using a ROPS and seatbelt). Some barriers include costs of ROPS, knowing where to go to get information about a ROPS and seatbelt, having barns with entrances too low to accommodate a ROPS, being uncomfortable wearing a seatbelt, and believing that a farmer can "jump clear" of a tractor in the event of an overturn.
5. Credibility - Use credible central characters. Make sure that the people featured in campaign messages are those whom your audience will like, respect, and believe. The characters should reflect the characteristics valued by audience members regardless of whether they are actually similar to audience characteristics. For example, part-time farmers may not dismiss the tractor

overturn experience of a full-time farmer. A farmer who has farmed full-time since childhood, however, may think that inexperience or a lack of familiarity with the land causes a tractor overturn by a part-time farmer who took up farming after retirement. Similarly, although the target audience is the farming community, a member of an EMS team who describes the devastating consequences of an overturn incident is likely to be a credible source.

6. Social Influence - Include “important others” as part of the target audience. Create messages to persuade those who are influential in farmers’ lives. For example, spouses, children, and parents may all exert a powerful influence on the process of deciding to purchase a ROPS and to wear a seat belt.
7. Address Misconceptions - Find out the beliefs of target audience members first, then address those specific misconceptions or strengthen existing positive beliefs. Messages that reiterate what farmers already know are a wasted effort. Messages that address misconceptions and create beliefs that ROPS are important are necessary to change attitudes and behavior.
8. Value Framing - Frame the action you want (purchase and use of ROPS and seatbelts, etc.) in terms of people’s most important values. This may take the form of being a “safety-minded” farmer or being a “good father”—whatever the case, this less “rational” approach can be very effective. After all, advertisers do it all the time!
9. Keep it personal - Don’t give people statistics and then leave readers to do the work of thinking about how it applies to them. Explain how these facts are pertinent to them as readers, right now and not in the future (if possible).
10. Immediate Danger - Immediate threats to life and health are far more effective than long term threats with delayed consequences. Studies of risk perception show that most people are less motivated to change their behavior because of the *possibility* that something bad could happen, and even less so when that risk is spread over the long term. The more immediate the perceived danger, the more likely audience members will attend to a message and change their behavior.
11. Suspicious - For the specific issue being addressed (e.g. retrofitting ROPS), find out what people’s suspicions are—maybe farmers believe this is just a ploy by equipment dealers to increase profits. One persuasive technique is to show how no one is profiting by promoting an action like retrofitting ROPS—or even arguing that the action runs counter to perceived self-interest. Messages can address how dealers and banks make no profit from ROPS sales and that they are engaged in ROPS promotion as a way of trying to save the lives and economic well being of neighbors, friends, and customers.
12. Repetition - A single message is unlikely to create behavior change. Few messages are so powerful. Therefore, make sure that audience members are exposed to multiple campaign messages as many times as possible. Saturating the environment with these messages conveys the importance of the issue and will help to create dialogue in the community about the issue, which should also support behavior change.

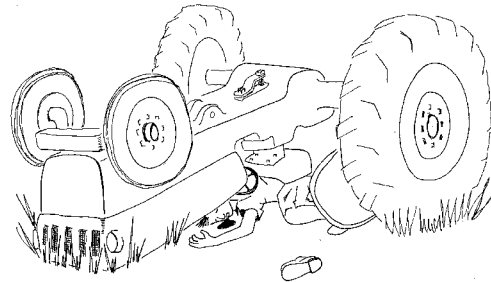
13. Multi-channel distribution - Messages that work together and build on each other through different media: print, news, radio, TV, posters, have more influence than any one media method alone. Repeating a slogan or having a common closing line to all or most messages can provide a sense of unity to the campaign. Also, each medium has strengths and weaknesses. Using several media can take advantage of the strengths of all.



14. Be realistic - There are many influences in the lives of the audience members. Remember that campaign messages are only one source of influence. Don't expect a revolutionary change overnight. Research suggests that repeated exposure to a series of well-planned and coherent messages over a long period of time is more effective than brief campaigns.

Without a ROPS and seat belt the operator is unprotected during an overturn.

The ROPS and seat belt messages included in this notebook were developed according to these principles. The principles themselves are derived from many years of research about the design and use of effective mass communication messages.



Formal studies of many of the mass communication messages included in the notebook were completed. Based on the results of these theoretical and empirical studies, the messages were modified and improved.

During a recent six-year period, 76 Kentucky farmers died when their tractors overturned. Another 32 died when they fell off moving tractors. ROPS and seat belts could have saved all 108 lives.

This document is included in the notebook in order to share information about the design of mass communication message campaigns.
