

Communicating the Message

It can be a challenge to identify a target audience, adapt a prevention message to fit that audience, and find a successful way to communicate your message. The 10 strategies that follow were drawn from various international, national, and local organisations based on their research and experiences with information dissemination. **Please adapt these strategies to fit the specific social and cultural needs of your target audience.**

Emphasis has been placed on identifying gender-sensitive ways to target specific audiences and communicate information. The gender characteristics of your target audience may influence the way you develop your message, the time and place your message will be most effective, and the method you choose to disseminate your message.

In addition to outlining 10 general strategies for effectively communicating HIV/AIDS prevention messages, this module provides specific information for practitioners interested in communicating their message to audiences such as community members, the media, policy makers, and funders. These target audiences are often the focus of HIV/AIDS prevention information. For this reason, they are given special attention here:

-  **Community members** are individuals in a defined community to whom you are interested in providing prevention information in the form of one-on-one communication, education workshops, or public forums, such as town meetings.
-  **The media** are the individuals who control access to various forms of communication seen by a broad audience, such as television, radio, print journalism (newspapers, newsletters, magazines), and billboards or other advertisements.
-  **Policy makers** are those individuals who create legislation and have the power to allocate funds for current and future programmes. Although policy makers often appropriate funds, they are not the only source of funding for programmes. Foundations and other such organisations, governmental or non-governmental, can also be targeted for funding.

The term “gender” is used to describe the various characteristics assigned to women and men by a given society. The term “sex” refers to biological characteristics. Gender is socially constructed, learned, and can vary from culture to culture, generation to generation, and over time due to societal changes. Gender roles reflect the behaviours and relationships that societies believe are appropriate for an individual based on his or her sex.

Summary:



This “Communicating the Message” module provides ten strategies to assist prevention practitioners and advocates as they design and disseminate prevention messages. Specific information is provided to highlight the different strategies needed when targeting audiences such as community members, the media, policy makers, and funders. Emphasis has been placed on identifying gender-sensitive ways to both communicate information and to target specific audiences. Communicating the Message is a component of the *UNAIDS Resource Packet on Gender & AIDS*, which includes additional modules, fact sheets, and an almanac.

Goal:



To provide HIV/AIDS prevention advocates with 10 effective strategies to communicate HIV/AIDS prevention information.



Intended Audience:

Programme/Policy Developers
 Health Educators
 Community Leaders
 Health Advocates

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10 Effective Strategies for Communicating the Message

1) Set goals prior to designing and disseminating your message

Take the time to set goals for yourself before you begin designing and disseminating your message. Be sure to identify what it is that you want to accomplish (i.e., what you want to communicate, who you want to reach, which format the message should take, what outcome is desired, etc.). Create a realistic timetable to help you adhere to your goals.

The media:

- ◆ Create a timetable around scheduled public events, such as World AIDS Day or conferences/meetings. The publicity of such events can help you capture the attention of journalists and address their need to cover “hot” stories.

Policy makers/funders:

- ◆ Do not expect policy to be created or changed overnight. Policy makers and funders often work in environments where formalised protocols can slow down the decision-making process. Your timetable and goals need to reflect this fact.

2) Know your subject matter / Identify your message

In order to convey a message effectively, you must first be well informed. Take time to research your topic to ensure that you are knowledgeable and comfortable with the subject matter. Identify whether or not previous prevention messages were successful, so you can learn from those efforts. Conduct a needs assessment of your target audience or use existing resources (i.e., local or national data) to determine where prevention efforts are most needed. Be sure to keep gender in mind while conducting your research (e.g., gather data on both males and females).

3) Select your audience strategically / Know your audience

Research the audience you would like to target. Identify their interests and concerns regarding the topic, as well as the extent to which the audience is likely to respond to your

message. In addition, identify where and how your audience can be most easily reached.

Community members:

- ◆ Know the size and distribution of the target audience, become familiar with their use of language, identify relevant socio-cultural factors (gender-roles, customs, beliefs, etc.), and investigate their economic status.
- ◆ Identify positive and enabling characteristics of the community. This information will help you target your message and will also provide insight as to why the community members may make certain health decisions that can influence your message.

The media:

- ◆ Identify which media outlets have traditionally covered HIV/AIDS stories.
- ◆ Be aware of any current HIV/AIDS media campaigns that are underway. Avoid communicating identical messages from other campaigns; rather, add to or build on their messages to expand the media coverage.
- ◆ Compile a list of reporters, journalists, and media outlets that traditionally cover HIV/AIDS stories. This list will be helpful as you decide which outlet you want to use.
- ◆ Keep in mind that women and children have less access to traditional media outlets (newspapers, television, radio, etc.) than men. Make sure you choose a media outlet that your intended audiences will have an opportunity to be exposed to.

Policy makers/funders:

- ◆ Research which HIV/AIDS related policies are already in existence and which policy makers are active in the area of HIV/AIDS. Also, identify policy makers from districts/areas where HIV/AIDS is most prevalent. If possible, begin to develop a relationship with these individuals (send letters, call, visit, provide them with information about your programmes, etc.).
- ◆ Research funding sources to identify which organisations typically fund HIV/AIDS related issues.

4) Include the community

Be sure to include local community members in the design and dissemination of your message. Their input can help ensure that the message is appropriate for them and that the message will be received well. In addition, participation of

community members can help create ownership of the message and the process. In selecting community members to participate, be aware of gender-roles that may limit women's and girls' access to participation. You may need to make special efforts and think of creative, innovative ways to ensure their participation. Incorporate any feedback you receive from the community into materials and messages.

Community members:

- ◆ Identify the key individuals who can help you determine the prevention needs of the community. These individuals may also be able to help you identify the best means to convey your message.
- ◆ Prior to communicating your message, be sure to ask specific community members to review your materials to help ensure that they are culturally and linguistically appropriate.

The media:

- ◆ Solicit input from community members about the media outlets to which they have access. Their input can help ensure that you select the best media outlet for your message.

5) **Form partnerships with other like-minded organisations**

Through the use of partnerships and networking, your message can reach a greater audience. Team up with organisations that will complement your work, including local, regional, national, and international organisations. Be sure to include women's organisations as well as organisations of people living with HIV/AIDS. Focus on each other's strengths and work together to convey the message. Teaming up can also increase the credibility of your message and may help you mobilise resources.

Community members:

- ◆ Seek out organisations that are well-respected in the community. They may include organisations that focus on health issues or non-health issues, such as housing, economic development, education, etc.

Policy makers/funders:

- ◆ By pairing up with research organisations, you may be able to increase the likelihood that policy makers will hear you.

6) **Tailor your message to fit the audience**

Once you know your audience, you can adapt the message you want to communicate in a way that will be better understood by your audience. For example, use the language with which your audience is most familiar, use examples that the audience can relate to, and tailor the message to fit their social and cultural realities.

Community members:

- ◆ Identify the literacy level of the community members and tailor your message appropriately. This may mean that you need to limit the amount of text you use and replace text with art work, pictures, graphs, etc.

7) **Choose the appropriate format for the message**

You will want to convey your message in a format that will be most effective at reaching your audience. Be sure to think about which form will reach the most people. Keep in mind that women, men, girls, and boys have different levels of access to resources.

Community members:

- ◆ If you are trying to reach a broad audience, mass media might be the most effective means to disseminate the message (television, radio, newspapers, billboards, etc.).
- ◆ Messages can also be effectively communicated with traditional dance, music, and theatre or other means that may be more successfully received by the community.
- ◆ Consider using community meetings, neighbourhood events, workshops, peer activities, brochures, etc.

The media:

- ◆ Identify the format to which the local press is most receptive (e.g., press release), and tailor your message to fit that format.
- ◆ Often, a personal human-interest story is a way to attract media attention.

Policy makers/funders:

- ◆ Policy makers respond to succinct, condensed messages about why HIV/AIDS is a problem that should be addressed (i.e., how HIV/AIDS affects them and the people they represent).

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8) Present clear, concise, and positive information

Prior to disseminating your message, check to be sure that the information is presented in a way that is simple to understand. In addition, it is best to use real world examples which allow the audience to better relate to the message. Don't use scare tactics or highlight negative issues. People respond better to positive forms of information.

The media:

- ◆ Members of the press are often constrained by deadlines. Be aware of this fact and present your message in a short and concise manner.
- ◆ Provide an overview of all necessary information in the first paragraph, such as who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- ◆ Fact sheets can also be an effective way to communicate information quickly to the media. Fact sheets should not have excessive text but rather should include statistics and figures to convey your message.

9) Select a time and place that will be most effective for your message

Choosing the appropriate time and place to convey your message should be based on when and where the target audience can best receive the message, not when it is most convenient for you to communicate the message. Also, messages can be more effective if they are disseminated in conjunction with a relevant current event (e.g., a recent conference on HIV/AIDS, AIDS awareness day, etc.).

Community members:

- ◆ If you are trying to gather people for a workshop, choose a time and place that fits within their busy schedules. Women, men, girls, and boys have very different daily responsibilities and therefore may not be available to receive messages at the same place and time.

The media:

- ◆ If you want a reporter to come to an event (e.g., conference, workshop, rally), give them ample time to plan for the event.
- ◆ Select your media outlet based on the time and place that the message will be heard.

- ◆ Know when your audience will be available to receive the message and use the media outlet that will fit that timeframe.

Policy makers/funders:

- ◆ If HIV/AIDS related issues are being addressed in the legislature, approach policy makers at that time because they may be more aware of the issues.
- ◆ Timing can be as simple as knowing when legislators are in session or knowing deadlines for funding applications.
- ◆ Be respectful of the policy maker's time.

10) Evaluate the process / Learn from your mistakes

Conduct a continual evaluation of the dissemination process. Follow up to identify who the message reached and whether the message was effective. In addition, keep a running list of complications you encountered during the process. You can learn from your successes and your challenges the next time around. The lessons you learn can be beneficial to other prevention efforts as well.

Community members:

- ◆ Involve community members in the evaluation process and be sure to keep them informed about the results.

The media:

- ◆ Keep clippings/videos of information that was communicated through the media, along with the contact information of the reporter who covered the story. These materials can be helpful as you plan your next communication strategy. Such a portfolio can also help establish credibility and may help you gain additional access to members of the media.

Policy makers/funders

- ◆ Chart your progress in working with policy makers and develop strategies for the future.

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