




How can the principles of story help you solve your health communication challenge?


Think story first, tools last.

We often get so caught up in figuring out how to communicate—Twitter, Facebook, webinars, posters, videos, infographics—that we forget the importance of what we communicate. If you get clear about what you have to say, and tell the right story, every communication tool will be more effective. If you don't get the story right, there is no tool powerful enough to truly connect with your audience and inspire them to action.

Know your audience.



Speaking of your audience, who is it? No matter how powerful or compelling your message, assuming that everyone you want to reach cares about what you have to say is a dangerous trap. You can't be everything to everyone. Determine who is most likely to care about your message, and focus your storytelling efforts on them. Clarifying your audience informs your choices about how best to tell your story, and increases the odds you'll connect with those most likely to help you spread that story.



Make it personal.


You have data that proves your argument. You want to use it, right? The problem is that even the best data is still a number, disconnected from the human experience of your audience. But if you can put a name, a face, and a narrative to that data, you can make an emotional connection, and create empathy. People relate to, identify with, and remember people and their stories. Numbers, not as much.

Find your “Get It” gap.

Think about the people who really understand what matters about your message, those who are your biggest advocates. What do they get that others don't? Answer that, and you've found your “Get It” gap. Getting clear about that “Get It” gap—and how your advocates have bridged it—can help you unlock the secret to making your story connect with the people you most want to reach.

Seek multiple entry points.

When choosing your tools, remember that different people learn differently. Some devour hard data but can't get through a long paragraph, while others are just the opposite. Some find truth in a good infographic, while others connect with a story told on film. For this project, we used three different modes to reach the audience: PowerPoint slides, short film, and live performance. Your best bet? Try lots of ways. Don't expect any one way to work with everybody.



Consider metaphor.

A good metaphor makes a complex idea easier to understand and remember. In our short film on the systemic causes of obesity and diabetes (“This is Bill. He has Diabetes.” See it here: <http://bit.ly/bill-has-diabetes>) we used the visual metaphor of ladders to show how hard it can be to stay healthy when you don’t have easy access to fresh produce, health care, and jobs. In an instant, the ladders conveyed more information about the importance of access than we could have explained in multiple paragraphs of text.

Look for parallels and perpendiculars.

Parallels and perpendiculars are examples that help explain complex concepts. Parallels come from similar fields (such as other health organizations), perpendiculars from unrelated fields. For this project, we used a perpendicular: comparing portrait photographers to health providers taking sexual histories. On the surface, there seems to be no connection, but closer examination reveals similarities in situation and process, and the unexpected nature of the analogy makes it more memorable and potent.

Avoid the Curse of Knowledge.

You have deep knowledge about your subject. Generally, that’s good. But when you communicate with people who know less than you, it can be a curse. The curse of knowledge is a phenomenon described by Chip Heath and Dan Heath in “Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die.” They explain, “once we know something ... we find it hard to imagine not knowing it. Our knowledge has ‘cursed’ us. We have difficulty sharing it with others, because we can’t readily re-create their state of mind.” Not everyone knows your insider jargon. Not everyone sees the significance of that data set. Step outside your expertise, and put yourself in the audience’s shoes to communicate better with them.

Answer “So What?”

The Curse of Knowledge often blinds us to the most important thing: why what we’re trying to say matters. Assume a skeptical, cynical audience with a short attention span. Assume that they will hear your message and say, “So what?” Be prepared to answer them. Then be prepared to hear “So what?” again. When you can show the audience that your message matters to them, that’s when they will pay attention, and that’s when they will care. And caring is key, because if we want people to act to improve their health or the health of someone they know—then they have to care.