

Creating a Social Dialogue on Air and Health Is Your Communication Part of the Problem or the Solution?

This White Paper summarizes a presentation made by Sharon Stevens APR, FCPRS, to delegates of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's AIR NOW 2011 Air Quality Conference. The content is intended for individuals and organizations interested in health promotion and environmental stewardship, however, the observations and recommendations within are useful to anyone planning or implementing a social marketing campaign.

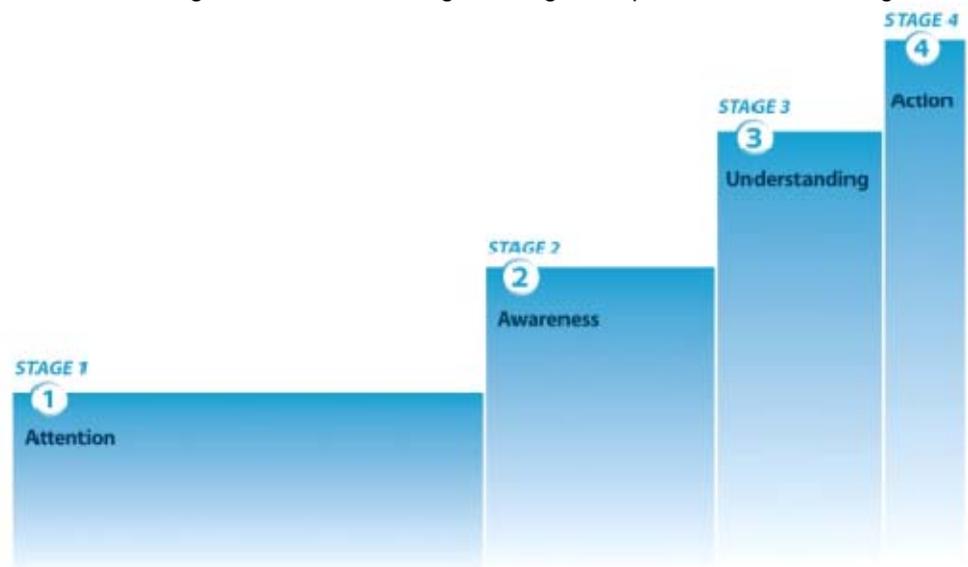
We've noticed a pattern in many social marketing programs aimed at behavior change. Too many messages promoting a change in behavior focus on encouraging people to do something and completely by-pass the importance of awareness and understanding of a topic.

Behavior change happens in stages. The marketing and communication designed to inspire and support behavior change must address each stage to be effective.

Behavior Change Communication has been well studied. Just Google it and you will find a plethora of theories that explain how and why behavior change seeking messages fail or succeed. Here's one of our preferred explanations – based on McGuire's (1) hierarchy for constructing persuasive communication. It suggests that before taking action, your audience must first;

- Tune into the message (attention)
- Attend to it (attention)
- Maintain interest in it (awareness)
- Understand it (understanding)
- Think about it (engagement)
- Agree with it (engagement)
- Store the message in memory (engagement)
- Decide to act on it (action or intention)

We've simplified McGuire's theory into four stages of communication to help our clients and colleagues focus on message strategies required within each stage.



Stage 1 - Attention

Are we stating the obvious? Perhaps, but too often this is overlooked. Getting attention is the mandatory stage in all social marketing communication yet, it is often the most challenging to address. So how can you get and sustain people's attention?

Don't overload them with details! We say this having witnessed the trail of destruction caused by the "Curse of Knowledge," when communicators forget they know a lot about their topic and campaign but their audiences do not.

It is critical at this stage of message development, to do everything possible to avoid the curse of knowledge.

We specialize in creating awareness and action related to the environment and its effects on health. Many of the client groups we counsel are frequently rubbing elbows with people who are already aware of and understand health and environment issues. These people are already at or beyond **stage four** in the continuum of change communication. They get it, agree and act accordingly.

Yet those responsible for outreach commonly forget the other 99.9% of their audiences, many of the people social marketing efforts are designed to reach, have little understanding of the environment, or more specifically the air, and its impact on health.

Often, in air quality and health communication, outreach messages and tools focus on details related to air quality index numbers, forecasts and suggested actions. But before the average person is going to tune into these kinds of messages and take action, they need to first say "AH HA – this affects me and I should pay attention".

How do you make that happen? Chip and Dan Heath, the authors of the New York Times bestseller *Made to Stick* state it with such simplicity - "by digging the whole before you try to fill it in." They explain that curiosity happens to people when they feel there is a gap in their knowledge. The goal is to open gaps in the first stages of communication - before closing them with too much detail.

This approach was used for the introduction of the Air Quality Health Index in British Columbia and that campaign will be used from this point forward to illustrate how the four stages of change communication can be applied.

Since 2005, on behalf of the Federal and Provincial Governments, and a host of environment and health NGO's, our team developed and managed the social marketing program for Canada's new Air Quality Health Index.

Let's qualify this first. British Columbians enjoy some of the best air quality in the world. However, regional variations and interface forest fires can sometimes make the air quality pretty bad. When that happens, communication goals get punted half way down the football field – because poor air quality can rapidly accelerate the speed through which people move from awareness to action. But the rest of the time, relatively good air quality makes getting people's attention a considerable challenge.

Our social marketing strategy for air quality and health in British Columbia assumed that for the majority of people, there is a gap in their knowledge related to what air quality is, how it affects their health and how the indices that measure and report air quality apply to them.

Our approach was later validated by a 2008 Environics Research Group Report. This research, based on focus testing about air quality indices and Canada's new Air Quality Health Index, confirmed there was indeed a knowledge gap about the effects of air quality on health and the indices that report on it. In one focus test, we witnessed a woman shriek with excitement at her new revelation that the air could be having an effect on how she feels. This had never before earned a place on her mental shelf!

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Stage 2 - Awareness

The goal at this stage of behavior change communication is to help the “unaware” by making them aware of their need for more information.

The stage 2 outreach messages about air quality and health in British Columbia proposed that AIR was something people needed to get to know. AIR QUALITY – GET TO KNOW IT!

Our goal was to place air quality and health on our audience's mental shelves. At this stage, outreach messages are really an extension of the power of curiosity based on this theory of “digging the hole” before filling it in. All information at this stage must focus on the “core of the idea”. This meant leaving out many details of the new Air Quality Health Index and the calls to action to use it and instead focusing on the core idea that air quality was something people should know more about.

Stage 3 – Understanding

The goal of stage 3 is to ensure that messages and information support increased understanding. Even at this stage, messages should remain as simple and unimimidating as possible. They are intended to start “filling in the hole.”

The website we created to support the air quality campaign, www.airhealthbc.ca, presented the actual real time Air Quality Health Index for each community. But the Index was not what people would first land on when visiting the site. We knew many web visitors may be the newly curious. So, in addition to providing the Index rating for their community within one click, the site presented branded stage 1, stage 2 and stage 3 messages to appeal to audiences at all stages in behavior change communication.

Even in our use of the social media tool Twitter, in the confines of only 140 characters, we shared messages addressing each stage of behavior change communication.



Did you know children and infants more time outdoors and therefore a more susceptible to #airpollution #airquality

4 Oct via web ☆ Favorite □ Retweet ↻ Reply

The goal at stage 4 goal is to reassure the audience's intent to act.

Stage 4 – Engagement / Action

The goal at stage 4 is to reassure the audience's intent to act. The messages in this final stage of change communication should be detailed, reassuring, and concrete and include clear calls to action. Using the Air Quality Health Index example, stage 4 messaging focused on "Know the Number – Protect Your Health," with repeated calls to action to check the Index on a regular basis.

At the end of the day, any form of behavior change communication is about people and their individual relationship with your topic. Each person will be at a different stage in this relationship.

We've created a simple worksheet designed to guide communication and outreach professionals through the process of key message development for each stage in their social marketing campaign aimed at behavior change. It expands on these four quadrants or stages.

ATTENTION <i>Goal is to make them stop, and say "what is this?"</i>	AWARENESS <i>Goal is to help the unaware. Create awareness of need.</i>
UNDERSTANDING <i>Goal is to inspire those who are interested. Create some level of understanding about the issue.</i>	ACTION <i>Goal is to reassure their intent to engage. Make it easy for them to take action.</i>

Communication designed to support behavior change is a continuum – and you can't assume what stage people are at when they are exposed to your message

Feel free to download this worksheet from our resources page on www.solutiongroup.ca and use it to ask yourself these important questions;

Are the majority of your key messages aimed at the ACTION stage – with lots of detail about your topic?

Would equally as many fall into the AWARENESS and UNDERSTANDING stage where your goal is to dig the hole and start filling in the knowledge gap with only the appropriate amount of information required to sustain someone's interest and inspire increased understanding.

Do enough of your communication messages and tools address the ATTENTION stage encouraging people to stop and say "what is this? Is there something I should know? Does this deserve a place on my mental shelf".