

Public Health Communication

Effective Dissemination Reference Guide

Choosing the right channels for your audience,
your message, and your organization.

Even with well-crafted messages and engaging communication products, many public health professionals run into the same challenge: reaching the people we're trying to reach. When it's time to share our work, it's often unclear which channels will work to connect us to our intended audiences - or what resources we'll need to use those channels effectively. Too often, dissemination is treated as the final step of a communication strategy. But if your message is going to matter, it has to make it to the right people. That means thinking about dissemination *before* you develop your communications product.

Message Development 101: Building Blocks for Your Dissemination Strategy

- 1 Define your goal:** Why are you creating a communication product? What are you hoping to change? If this communications product works exactly as intended, what will happen? Be specific. A clear goal will keep your dissemination efforts focused and grounded in impact.
- 2 Define your audience:** Who needs to receive this information for your goal to become reality? Whose attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors need to change? Who is in a position to act? Once you've identified your intended audience, get to know them. What's important to them? What motivates them? Why haven't they already done what you want them to do? What's standing in their way? What are they already thinking, feeling, or doing instead?
- 3 Define your core message:** This is where your goal and your audience come together. What does your audience need to know, feel, or believe for you to achieve your goal? At this stage, craft a basic message the speaks to *your* public health goal, while reflecting *their* needs, preferences, and values.

Your Dissemination Strategy

Once you know your goal, your audience, and your core message, it's time to figure out how to deliver that message effectively. There's no single "right" channel. The best option depends on who you're trying to reach, what you're trying to share, and what's realistic based on your organization's resources and policies.

The remainder of this reference guide will share recommended channels and product types based on common target audiences.

Use this reference guide during planning and product development as you consider these key questions:

- Which communication channels are the best fit for your intended audience?
- What types of products or messages work best within those channels?
- Which products and channels is your organization most equipped to use, based on your resources, policies or funding requirements, and staff capacity?

This table is designed to help you think strategically about dissemination. For each audience, you'll find communication channels they're likely to engage with, types of products that work well, and tips to guide your approach. As you plan, consider not just what would be ideal, but what's feasible: what staff time, funding, or organizational support do you actually have? The most effective dissemination strategies strike a balance between what will reach your audience and what your team can realistically sustain.

Audience	Communication Channel	Products	Notes & Tips
Policymakers	• Direct meetings or calls with staffers or policymakers themselves • Legislative hearings • Hill Days/Capitol Days • Town halls and other public hearings • News media coverage	• Policy briefs • Issue-specific one-pagers • Statements, testimony, speeches/talking points • Brief presentations, if invited • Op-Eds	Keep it short and direct. Focus on budget or community impact. Reach out or send communications products before key votes or hearings.
Healthcare Providers	• Partnerships with medical schools or continuing education providers/platforms • Professional journal publications • Email lists and professional newsletters (especially via professional/medical associations) • Conferences • Healthcare or medical boards and commissions meetings	• Webinars and CME sessions • Research summaries • Peer-reviewed articles • Case studies • Presentations • One-pagers	Emphasize clinical relevance, patient impact, or workflow integration. Make summaries and one-pagers easy to skim.
Academic Researchers/ Academia	• Peer-reviewed journals • Academic conferences • University listservs and email networks • Websites or research blogs • LinkedIn • In-person networking (conferences, alumni events, etc.)	• Peer-reviewed journal articles • Research briefs or summaries • Slide decks/ presentations for conferences • Web content and blog posts • One-pagers tailored for academic partners • Suggested citations included in your reports and factsheets	Use clear but rigorous language. Highlight data sources, methods, and evidence base. Align with academic interests such as theory, evaluation, or innovation. Consider open-access options to increase reach.

Audience	Communication Channel	Products	Notes
Media Outlets & Media Professionals/ Journalists	• Direct email or phone outreach to reporters, editors, or producers • Press conferences • Newswire distribution services • Social media (tagging journalists or outlets, primarily X or LinkedIn)	• Press releases • Media advisories • Op-eds • Interviews (train spokespeople) • Talking points • Direct quotes from experts • Short video clips, photos, and fact sheets (as part of a topic-specific pitch)	Hire and assign staff to build & maintain relationships with news outlets. Prioritize local and regional media: get to know their recurring segments and hot topics, tailor your pitches to those. Establish your organization as an expert on one or two topics. Use plain-language materials and provide direct contacts for follow-up.
Funders	• Direct email or phone outreach • Your website • Board presentations • Grant reports • LinkedIn • In-person networking • Conferences and events	• Personalized emails or calls (require research) • Elevator pitch • Pitch decks or presentations • Impact reports • Dashboards • Testimonials (written) • Videos • ROI-focused one-pager or briefs	Funders appreciate products that lead with outcomes, sustainability, and alignment with their mission. Provide a succinct overview of results & ROI from previous projects. Effective outreach may also require staff devoted to relationship-building and continuous engagement with funders.
Community-Based Organizations	• Direct outreach and meetings (one-on-one) • Community meetings • Newsletters (yours and target partners) • Social media groups (LinkedIn, Facebook) • Websites (yours, partner websites, etc.)	• Webinars • Newsletter blurbs • Presentations • Resource guides • Blog posts	Prioritize building trust and fostering long-term, mutually beneficial relationships through regular communication and collaboration. Frame around shared values and local impact.
Other Public Health Professionals	• Professional listservs and associations • Your newsletter and partner newsletters • Conferences • Webinars • Continuing education platforms • LinkedIn • Your website • Podcasts	• Presentations and trainings • Toolkits • Resource libraries • Tip sheets • Newsletter blurbs • Guest spots on podcasts • LinkedIn posts and blogs • Suggested citations in your reports and factsheets.	Newsletter blurbs and webinars can efficiently disseminate information among public health professionals, often at no additional cost. As a public health professional, consider what channels <i>you</i> prefer to use.

Audience	Communication Channel	Products	Notes
General Public	• Social media (Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, YouTube) • Local news outlets/local media • Organization website • Text messaging • Traditional media (newspaper, radio, TV) • Paid ads	• Campaigns and PSAs • Infographics • Short videos • Social posts • Blogs • Press releases • Podcasts	Materials developed for the “general public” are rarely effective. Pick a segment within the general public (e.g. parents of young children, older adults, rural residents, college students, etc.), and select specific channels those people are known to engage with.
Youth and Young Adults	• Instagram, TikTok, YouTube • Influencer collaborations • Marketing campaigns (these leverage multiple channels, including digital, mass media, in-person) • School or youth group channels • SMS/text campaigns	• Short videos • Social media content, ideally tied to existing trends or developed in collaboration with known creators/influencers. • Interactive content/campaigns (polls, challenges) • Infographics and visual posts, often paired with trending audio • Events and installations	Use humor, music, or trends. Peer voice is critical. Prioritize mobile-first content.
Tribes/Indian Country	• Gathering grounds • Word of mouth • Tribal conferences • In person events and convenings • Community events and cultural gatherings • Partnerships with Tribal Councils, Tribal Epidemiology Centers, Indian Health Services • Tribal radio, newsletters, and news outlets	• Statements and speeches in community gatherings, council meetings, or Tribal media • Presentations at conferences (collaborate with Tribal representatives if possible and consider opening with a prayer) • Hard copy letters • Letters to the editor and ads in Tribal news • Guest spots on Tribal radio or ads/radio PSAs • Flyers or posters or multimedia developed in partnership with Tribal partners	Build trust through long-term partnerships and established Tribal liaisons. Honor tribal sovereignty and self-determination. Co-create products when possible. Use respectful, community-centered language and visuals. Prioritize local, relationship-focused channels.

Sources used to inform this reference guide

The guidance shared in this reference tool is grounded in a over a decade of applied experience in public health communications. This includes specialized knowledge cultivated through work with programs across multiple domains, including Tribal public health initiatives and programs focused on public health training and technical assistance. The external resources listed below are intended to supplement that expertise with additional data, insights, and best practices from the field. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list.

The guide itself is a prototype and has not yet been tested by end users. We welcome your feedback and suggestions to strengthen its relevance and usability.

Berkeley Media Studies Group:

- Media Advocacy 101: bmsg.org/resources/media-advocacy-basics/

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

- Clear Communication Index: Research-based tool for developing and assessing public health communication materials: cdc.gov/ccindex/
- Gateway to Health Communication: cdc.gov/health-communication/php/communication-resources/index.html

International Association for Indigenous Aging:

- Utilizing Native American Media: assets-us-01.kc-usercontent.com/ffacfe7d-10b6-0083-2632-604077fd4eca/42f772b3-0487-4069-a804-f81d6b1bf0aa/Utilizing%20Native%20American%20Media.pdf

Journal of Public Health Management and Practice:

- Getting the Word Out: New Approaches for Disseminating Public Health Science: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5794246/>

National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO):

- Health Department Communications: naccho.org/communications/health-department-communications

Nielsen:

- Provides a broad array of research and reports on audience behavior and preferences across all channels and preferences: nielsen.com/insights/

Pew Research Center:

News Habits and Media: pewresearch.org/topic/news-habits-media/



We'd love to know if this guide worked for you! Please reach out to communications@nnphi.org to with questions and feedback.

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