HOW TO DESIGN THE PERFECT NUTRITION MESSAGE

By
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Designing a nutrition message is like playing with a Matrushka doll. For those unfamiliar with this ancient Russian toy, the Matrushka is a nesting of identical hollow wooden dolls just small enough to fit inside each other. One simply lifts off the first, and presto, there is one more, a slightly smaller apple-cheeked, smiling, buxom peasant woman in the leaping colors of her traditional garb. Lift her off and there is yet another and another.

The longer I work in nutrition education, the more I see how each simple-seeming problem turns out, when probed, to be a Matrushka--a nesting of problems.

How is it possible, for example, to design a breastfeeding message to mothers but not to peek inside her to discover that she is more than one? She works at home. She is a salaried worker. She is rich. She is poor. And for each of her there are distinct concerns to cope with and psychological barriers to lower before she can be helped to breastfeed.

Peer deeply into the nutrition Matrushka again. See, there is more than a nesting of mothers there. Doctors who discourage breastfeeding. Hospitals that separate a mother from her newborn. Milk companies that woo her with bottle feeds. Legislators who are numb to needful laws. Businessmen who violate them when they pass. Officials who are blind to the violations.

You can see our target audience is a Matrushka. Take one audience in hand and you uncover another. And for each target audience, a message must be prepared.

But even the message is a Matrushka. For example, improving infant nutrition means exclusive breastfeeding for the first four months of age; after four months, the introduction of a proper weaning food in addition to breast-feeding; at eight or nine months, the transition to "family food," etc. Each stage calls for a special message to the mother. Nor is that all. What about diarrhea management at every age? And the importance of weighing? More messages. What of the mother? Improving her infant's nutrition demands a better diet for her. What about the expectant mother? Again, more messages.

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How shall the message designer deal with all this? The answer is, he/she does it calmly and deliberately in accordance with principles fashioned from experience.

First, is the principle of priority. At any given time, one audience and its problem take precedence. The rest can also be ranked in importance. The messages can be dealt with in the same fashion. Some are more urgently needed than others. Suddenly, the task assumes an orderliness. The chaos subsides. Now, we know where we have to begin.

Second, is the principle of zero-sum knowledge. Accept nothing on faith. Start with a presumption of total ignorance. Challenge the validity of every opinion, every conclusion. It may slow matters and offend the vanity of some authorities at the start, but it will advance the cause more rapidly and with greater assurance once it is engaged.

Figure 1 sets forth the process for developing the campaign. Though the tasks involved are mainly the responsibility of others, the message designer should be familiar with them. They are the source for all the material from which messages will be fashioned.

The message is the hope of the program. A poorly-crafted message will doom the program in advance. Once communications strategies have been agreed to, target audiences described, objectives set, necessary messages identified, the task of message design will benefit from adherence to its own strategy of tested disciplines.

Disciplines of Message Design Strategy

Message design strategy is guided by disciplines of Content, Design, Persuasion, and Memorability Factors. Each of these has an important part to play in overall message impact. Not every message will make either the same use or any use at all of these factors, but they should be considered seriously every time. That way they serve the designer as a checklist so he will be less apt to overlook the decisive contribution some factor could make.

Content Factors: (1) The Problem; (2) Target Audience; (3) Resistance Points; (4) Solution; (5) Required Action and (6) Authoritative Source.

The Problem has to be dealt with so everyone comprehends it clearly. It is not satisfactory to identify the problem as "the decline of breast-feeding." That is the the overall problem of the program. But for an individual message directed at the mother with a job outside the home, for example, the specific problem is how to manage a breast-feeding regimen around her job.

Thus, focused identification of the Target Audience is a significant factor. We have already noted that mothers are a segmented group. A message designed to build maternal confidence must somehow invoke her presence so as to create an empathetic environment for winning her attention. Typically, she should be riddled with self-doubts and other Resistance Points. The research should have detected them. They must be countered and neutralized so she is freed to respond to the message.

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FIGURE 1

PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING NUTRITION COMMUNICATIONS

	DEVELOP COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY			IMPLEMENT STRATEGY		ASSESS STRATEGY
	Beginning with:	**Basic Investigation**	**Followed by Production of Draft Materials**	**Testing Messages and Materials with:**	**Utilization/ Implementation**	**Formative Evaluation**
WHAT	General Goals	The problem itself				
	General Target Groups	Specific objectives for specific target groups; segmented audience; better understanding of the target group	Messages for different materials and media	"Experts"	Place of diffusion	Feedback results to project managers
				Policy Makers	Frequency of diffusion	
		Communication systems	Delivery systems for information for each objective for each target group	Target Audience	Training of local agents	Disseminate strengths and weakness to policy makers
		Complimentary systems	Integration with health clinics, pharmacies, public and private service and commodity distribution centers		Coordination with other IE&C programs	Assess costs
					Coordination with services	
HOW		Conducts: Participative studies → Quantitative studies	In-house production or contract out	Focus groups	Control Systems:	
		Review: existing studies		Individual interviews	• observation by supervisors	
		Include: feedback from ongoing program		Purpose: test for comprehension, cultural relevance, practicality, emotional appeal, memorability	• report by the community	
		Prepare: a model describing the relationship & assumptions upon which the project will be based		Comparing materials & messages with others or in isolation	• periodic reporting by field workers	
					• surveys of KAP changes	
					• contract monitoring of media	

The objective is for her to be receptive to the Solution. The solution depends on her carrying out Required Actions. Presumably these were "concept-tested" earlier with a sampling of the target group and the determination made that the actions are reasonable, practical, and acceptable.

The message may benefit from an Authoritative Source to lend credence to its claims. This may be in the words of a doctor or another respected member of the community--the community health worker, the midwife, the lady home visitor, etc.

Design Factors: (1) The Single Idea; (2) Language and Cultural Relevance; (3) Situation and Character Identification; (4) Distinctive Message Style and (5) Low "Fatigue" Index.

Each message--a radio spot, a poster, a film, a booklet, etc.--is more effective when it is confined to a Single Idea directed at a special problem of a specific target audience. Such messages are more likely to be absorbed, concentrated on, and reacted to. Furthermore, a Single Idea message enables the designer to say more in less time and to build into it other elements to enhance its effectiveness. Too many ideas, thrown haphazardly together, produce a clutter in which no single idea can be vigorously advocated. Even in booklets ideas should be sorted out and developed individually, both for easier reference and greater impact.

Language and Cultural Relevance is the guiding rule of presentation. The style and expression employed must be suitable. The designer is aware that his purpose is to advocate change. But the proposal must be set in a cultural context not alien to the audience. If there are personalities involved, the Situation and Character Identification must be thoughtfully established. Slavish mirroring of target types is often inadvisable. People may more readily identify with aspirations than with their realities. A well-known sports personality or a famous woman may offer more potent identification value to target audiences than people like themselves. The testing of alternatives can help the designer decide.

Since the campaign is likely to employ more than one message and in diverse media, it will benefit from a Distinctive Message Style. The sounds, the look, the attitude, and the key language should be consistent, message to message, medium to medium. Such treatment has a cumulative effect on public awareness. Music is often a helpful device so long as it supports rather than dominates the message.

Messages accumulate impact with repetition so long as they maintain their consistency. No message lasts forever. Eventually it wears out, loses its effect, and must be replaced. Sometimes we replace it prematurely. Those close to the campaign are usually the first to tire. The message designer must fend off the assault. The surest weapon is a message with a Low "Fatigue" Index--one that remains interesting and captivating as well as instructive and persuasive for as long as possible. The finest creative instincts of the designer are called for.

Persuasion Factors: (1) Reason; (2) Empathy; (3) Concern Arousal; (4) Action Capability; (5) Believability; (6) Creativity; and (7) Benefits.

A message is obliged to offer the Reason for its proposal and why it is desirable. This "reason why" may help to dispel doubt before it arises and throws up a barrier to the rest of the message.

Because emotion always affects decision, Empathy with the audience is essential. The audience must sense an emotional assurance that someone cares and understands the problem. Advice is rarely taken from an unsympathetic or indifferent source.

But she must also be made to feel concern with the problem. Otherwise, why should she bother? Concern Arousal, but not guilt or paralyzing fear, is a valuable message equity. It is the incentive to give attention.

Action Capability is the compatibility between what the message asks of a mother and what she is capable of performing despite limitations of income, time, transportation, food availability, water supply, fuel, etc. Even the slightest conflict between the two fatally impairs the effectiveness of the message.

Believability of the statement of the problem, the solution, the message environment, the promised benefits—must fit the belief systems of the audience. These vary among audiences. Messages must contain themselves within the audience's permissible limits. The temptation to go beyond—to "oversell"—can be overwhelming. The results are almost always damaging; the audience becomes disillusioned and is lost to the effort.

But the promise of Benefits from the new behavior is something the audience expects to hear. Otherwise, there is little incentive. But the benefits must be realistic, neither overblown or indifferently offered.

Memorability Factors: (1) Idea Reinforcement; (2) Minimizing Distractions and (3) Reprise (repetition).

To "seat" the new idea and persuade its adoption calls for Idea Reinforcement. The aim is for maximum awareness in the well-founded belief that it will make a qualitative difference in attitude and behavior. Repeated references to key phrases maximizes awareness. Theme music can be a potent reinforcement device, but rarely jingles, despite their popularity. They may be remembered but usually for the wrong reasons and not for the serious content we aim to transmit.

Keeping out clutter means Minimizing Distractions like offering more detail than the audience needs to know. "What will happen if they do not know this?" is a good test of the information. Every element must be essential to the message. If not, eliminate it. The time and attention of the audience must not be trifled with.

Reprise is the repetition of key elements. It almost always enhances memorability. It can never diminish it.

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Message design is no casual obligation. If the facts were potent enough "to speak for themselves," design would be unnecessary. But to

employ facts, to persuade, to move someone to action means they will have to be "communicated" with the help of practitioners skilled in the special wisdom of message design. Such people, in full command of their craft, are blessed with a gift of the Gods.

When given the opportunity to be one of them, do not hesitate. Do not dawdle. Seize it. The gift should not be squandered.