Tips for communicating about masks in the midst of misinformation

Public health practitioners provide policymakers, the media, and the public with accurate, timely information. But how do we do this amid others spreading misinformation? Turning to other public health issues — like wearing seatbelts or practicing safer sex — reminds us that while widespread shifts in individuals' behavior toward health-promoting actions can be challenging, it is possible. There's no one easy communication solution, but here are some quick tips to help:

Try	**Starting with your goal.** Clarify what you want your audience to *do* before you start planning what you want to *say* to them. You can use the Layers of Strategy to clarify your goals. Start by asking: • What problem do you want to address? • What action do you want people to take? Is it a change in behavior? Policy? Something else?
Avoid	**Trying to say everything.** You can't be strategic and comprehensive at the same time. Stay focused on your top priorities.
Try	**Defining your audience.** Questions like these can help you refine your reach. Are you trying to: • let people who do not have masks know where to get one? • support people in continuing to wear masks who started out consistently but are no longer consistently wearing them? • encourage people who have never worn masks to use them? • support those willing to wear a mask in certain situations, but feel pressure not to wear one in other situations? • encourage people who are wearing masks incorrectly to wear them in a way that maximizes their effectiveness?

Make every Who holler! Make every Who shout!

> *Dr. Seuss*

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Avoid	**Thinking you can persuade everyone.** Many residents already understand the importance of wearing masks. Others aren't so sure. And some people refuse to wear a mask. There's no one message that will move everyone to wear a mask, especially those who have politicized the issue.
Try	**Acknowledging barriers to health-promoting behaviors.** Messages related to behavior change are more effective when they recognize the real-world challenges people face.
Avoid	**Shaming people.** Although shaming companies or industries like Big Tobacco can be effective, shaming individuals rarely works in public health campaigns. Instead, start where people are by acknowledging that these are challenging times and masks are not always comfortable. As with issues like HIV prevention, researchers have found creating a positive social norm around wearing masks works better than shaming those who are not wearing masks.

Putting it into practice with messages that avoid shame:

❌ *Message using shame (not recommended):*
We know a small minority of people who believe misinformation, refuse to wear masks, and are putting our whole community at risk. Our only hope for stopping COVID is holding these people accountable for their harmful actions.

✔ *Updated message reinforcing community values and avoiding shaming:*
Our health department's goal has always been to keep everyone in our county safe and healthy, and that is especially true in this challenging time. We know masks aren't always comfortable, but we also know that we all want to reopen our schools and businesses safely, and wearing masks helps stop the spread. We are asking everyone to wear masks consistently outside and inside businesses. We are up to this challenge, but it takes all of us acknowledging that we are in this together. We know the majority of our county is already doing their part to keep one another safe by wearing a mask.

Try	**Keeping values front and center in your message.** Facts and data are important but not enough to counter misinformation. Use messages and values, like interconnectedness, equity, and can-do spirit, to reinforce the new social norm that wearing a mask is the way to protect ourselves, our families, and our communities.
Avoid	**Repeating opposition frames.** Rebutting anti-mask campaigns puts spokespeople in the position of inadvertently repeating and legitimizing misinformation rather than leading with strong, science-based messages. For example, journalists reporting on vaccines often unintentionally gave false claims legitimacy by repeating them. We call repeating the opposition's frame using an "elephant trigger," based on George Lakoff's book, *Don't Think of an Elephant* (which, of course, makes you think about elephants!).

Putting it into practice and avoiding the "elephant trigger" trap:

Original message (not recommended):
"We know there's a lot of information out there saying masks don't work, that they don't stop COVID. But that's false. We need people to wear masks to keep our community safe.

Updated message:
Our county has come together to address many challenges before, and we know that we are up to this challenge. But we all must take care of one another, and the best way to do that is to wear a mask.

| Try | **Using caution when addressing false claims.**
Occasionally, public health practitioners may not be able to avoid addressing false claims. In these situations, we turn to George Lakoff and journalists who are using a technique called the "truth sandwich." Lakoff's recipe is:

1. Start with the truth. The first frame gets the advantage.
2. Indicate the lie. Avoid amplifying the specific language if possible.
3. Return to the truth. Always repeat truths more than lies. |

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Putting it into practice with a "truth sandwich" on masks:

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1. Our health department's goal has always been to keep the people in our county safe and healthy, and that is especially true in this challenging time. We know masks aren't always comfortable, and we are asking everyone to do something new by wearing them consistently outside and in businesses. The best evidence shows that consistent mask use protects those around us — our friends, family, loved ones, the people ringing up our groceries, and other workers. Recent research shows that when everyone wears a mask, we are less likely to get seriously ill, which keeps beds open in our emergency rooms for others and helps protect our hospital staff.

2. We've had many questions about recent posts implying that masks are ineffective or that they infringe on rights.

3. The science is clear: Masks work. We can keep our community safer when we wear them. At the health department, we want to be sure everyone knows that masks are effective. We know these are challenging times for everyone, and we are gratified that the majority of our county is already doing their part to keep each other safe by wearing a mask.

Try

Establishing a review process.
Health departments can create an ongoing mechanism for developing concise but compelling messages with regular opportunities to practice delivering the messages before speaking to community members, a reporter, or holding a press conference.