

Best Practices for health messaging in a social media world

1. **Assume your content will last forever.** When you choose and design your message, consider how it will come across in six months, a year, or even a decade. Build a timeframe directly into your message. You can do this by using language like, “Right now, in October 2020,” or putting clear, legible dates into photographs and infographics. All written statements should have dates on them for future reference, and if possible, dates of expiration. Sample language: “This information is specific to 10/20/2020 and unlikely to be reliable after 10/20/2021.”
2. **Choose your medium carefully.** Different methods of public communication have different strengths and weaknesses. Complex messaging needs time and space to be understood and requires mediums that people can access at their own pace, such as FaceBook or Instagram posts instead of approaches like media briefings or long videos that people may not be able to pay full attention to.
3. **You need catchy language, but you need the right catchy language.** Any phrase that’s easy to say and easy to read has the power to be repeated across millions of people. It’s nearly impossible to segment your audience – you can’t speak to only health care providers or only bench scientists. If you say it in public, it can spread everywhere. Your clever phrases will lose context, history, and any form of meaning beyond face value. If you coin a catchy phrase for public health education, it has to be really stinking obvious.
4. **You need to assume your message is up against a thousand lies.** No matter how much truth you have on your side, people will not accept that your message is true if it’s not also engaging and compelling. If your message boring, they’ll tune out and pay attention to the more exciting lies. The truth about health topics like COVID-19 is often uncomfortable and terrifying, and convincing others of an upsetting, horrifying message is going to be hard when you’re faced with a bunch of comforting untruths. But you have to know the lies are out there to have any chance at all in the marketplace of ideas.

When you look at those four points together, one thing stands out – the total loss of control over the message, and the complete elimination of context. Words take on lives of their own, out of time, space, and attribution.