OBVIOUS AND NOT-SO-OBVIOUS STRATEGIES TO DISSEMINATE RESEARCH

KEY MESSAGES

- A variety of creative methods should be used to disseminate new knowledge that challenges the status quo because people resist change and that makes it more difficult to get your message across.
- Findings on public health issues need to be disseminated to a wide public and may require less-obvious strategies to work.
- Developing new methods of dissemination that connect with the public and targeting an audience open to new ideas are key to spreading new information.

This is a summary of an article by Mindy Thompson Fullilove, Lesley L. Green, Lourdes J. Hernández-Cordero and Robert E. Fullilove, published in Health Promotion Practice in 2006.

Getting people to accept new research findings or embrace groundbreaking theories can sometimes be an uphill battle for those charged with transferring knowledge to people who can use it. This is often the case in presenting new research in the area of health disparities. By exploring the experiences of two organizations that have struggled to get research used, the authors of “Obvious and not-so-obvious strategies to disseminate research” show the importance of adapting dissemination strategies according to the audience, as well as applying innovative methods to help people accept new ideas. While the examples used in the article do not relate specifically to public health policy, they provide important lessons for knowledge transfer professionals looking for creative ways to get their message across in the health field — particularly when resistance is likely.

Resistance to Change

People’s realities and perceptions are shaped by past experiences. This means it is tough to get new information through to people when it does not fit with what they already know or believe. New ideas that threaten the status quo are often met with resistance — this, despite people often having little understanding as to why they hold fast to certain beliefs even when evidence exists to the contrary. To get people to change their way of thinking requires that they be shown both what their beliefs cannot explain and how new research or theories fill the knowledge gap.
Adapting Traditional Methods

The first example the authors give — the experience of the Task Force on Community Prevention Services, a group which assesses the evidence behind public health interventions — shows two things: first, the conventional approach to communicating information is more apt to be successful if a particular audience is already open to receiving it; and second, communicating research results often requires a combination of strategies.

Soon after it was formed, the task force started work on a comprehensive list of the best public health practices and disseminated its results through vaccination campaigns and child safety initiatives. It relied on a variety of traditional methods, such as using pamphlets, journal articles, books and conferences. According to the authors, the task force was most effective when it tailored these strategies to its audience. Engaging groups concerned with the findings and carefully evaluating past efforts to inform future dissemination efforts were also key. Although these are traditional strategies, they proved effective for the task force. And, in general, the authors suggest these methods work when transmitting information that fits the dominant thinking.

Novel Strategies

In addition to more obvious dissemination methods, however, it is sometimes necessary to resort to atypical strategies when transmitting conflicting information or information that is likely to meet resistance.

The article’s second example shows just how important it is to think outside the box when disseminating new data and theories. That example focuses on the Community Research Group, an organization that uses an innovative approach to get people to accept new research findings or theories. Their approach involves disseminating information to people who are likely receptive to it and relying on them to sway the opinions of others.

The Community Research Group used this method when disseminating their findings with respect to “root shock.” Root shock refers to the effect of disturbing or destroying neighbourhoods on the people who live in these communities. It predicts they go into a state of shock similar to the internal distress of breaking a bone. The research group’s work, however, found that contrary to pre-existing thought, other individuals, such as those attached to physical places, can undergo the same effects even when they do not live in the particular community.

The group applied two novel techniques to successfully disseminate the new information. First, movies were created to illustrate the personal experiences of those living in a renovated or demolished community. Through this medium, it was able to reach its audience on an emotional level. Second, neighbourhood walking tours were also used to let outsiders see how important an area could be to its inhabitants and what proposed changes might mean to them. The authors visited neighbourhoods in Baltimore, France and Wisconsin to spread the notion of root shock.

They note that these not-so-obvious ways of trying to reach target groups are especially important when transmitting evidence around health discrepancies or areas where generally accepted assumptions are often challenged. Since health disparities obligate people to address difficult subjects like racism, this type of research is likely to be met with resistance and requires particularly creative dissemination strategies. As the Community Research Group’s experience shows, by working with people who are receptive to the idea, or reaching an audience on a personal level, it may be easier to get a message across.

In conclusion, disseminating new knowledge to the public and
encouraging its widespread acceptance requires a variety of methods be used and adapted for an audience. Traditional methods work best when relaying information that fits the dominant thinking. However, while these strategies are often the easiest to apply, they are not necessarily the most effective when disseminating health information or other knowledge likely to meet with resistance. As the article shows, in these cases, developing new and innovative strategies is vital to spreading the word on important research, especially when it challenges the status quo.

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