Tips and Tools to Get Your Environmental Health Message Across

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Editor's Note: NEHA strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature this column on environmental health services from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in every issue of the *Journal*.

In these columns, authors from CDC's Water, Food, and Environmental Health Services Branch, as well as guest authors, will share insights and information about environmental health programs, trends, issues, and resources. The conclusions in these columns are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of CDC.

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A s an environmental health professional, you undoubtedly spend a lot of time communicating. Do people you're communicating with understand your main message? Putting your main message first, supporting it visually, and keeping your audience in mind can help you improve your department's communications to the public and other audiences.

Put the Most Important Message First

What action do you want people to take as a result of reading your material? The clearer and more direct you can be about this action at the beginning, the better.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Clear Communication Index is a research-based tool to help you develop and assess communication materials (CDC, 2019). It emphasizes putting your message up front and supporting it visually, such as with larger font or bolded text and a related image. Our Environmental Health Specialists Network (EHS-Net) uses it to develop plain language summaries of food safety research findings. Putting the main message first highlights the key recommended actions for food safety programs and the retail food industry (Figure 1).

Why is it so important to get to the point? People don't read when online, they scan (Nielsen Norman Group, 1997). If your main message is a punchline at the end, readers are unlikely to notice it. Getting to the point also shows respect for your readers' time.

Support Your Message With Related and Compelling Visuals

Data visualization techniques and tools are a great way to add compelling visuals to your work. Hearing the buzz about data visualization but not sure what it is or how to use it? CDC's National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network (Tracking) can help!

Tracking collects, integrates, and standardizes noninfectious disease and environmental data from national, state, and local partners. Tracking has more than 450 environmental health measures and more than 2 billion rows of data. To make these data accessible, usable, and actionable, it uses powerful online data visualization tools such as:

- **Data Explorer:** Users can create customizable maps, charts, and tables on a variety of health and environmental topics (Figure 2). These data visualizations show patterns over time and/or within a geographical area that can be used when messaging environmental health trends and emerging issues.
- **Info by Location:** Users can create a custom infographic that displays health and environmental data for your county (Figure 3). This visualization type is easily understood by all health literacy levels and can introduce environmental health concepts to the general public.

In addition to enhancing public health messaging, data visualization tools can be used by public health professionals to target prevention activities, monitor community health, identify communities at risk, inform city or state planning, inform health policies, and support epidemiological studies.

Keep Your Audience in Mind

Creating materials that fit your audience preferences can increase the uptake of your message. The following CDC resources offer examples of developing materials with the audience in mind.

Radon Communication Toolkit

Whether in the workplace, homes, or schools, the threat of elevated levels of radon exposure is a public health issue. CDC's online

FIGURE 1

Environmental Health Specialists Network (EHS-Net) Plain Language Summary Leads With Most Important Message

FIGURE 2

National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network's Data Explorer Tool Offers Customizable Maps and Health and Environmental Data Visualizations
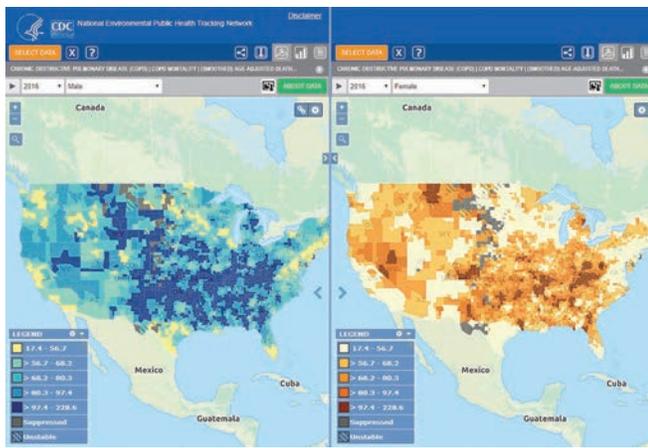

FIGURE 3

National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network's Info by Location Tool Provides Health and Environmental Data by County in an Infographic Format
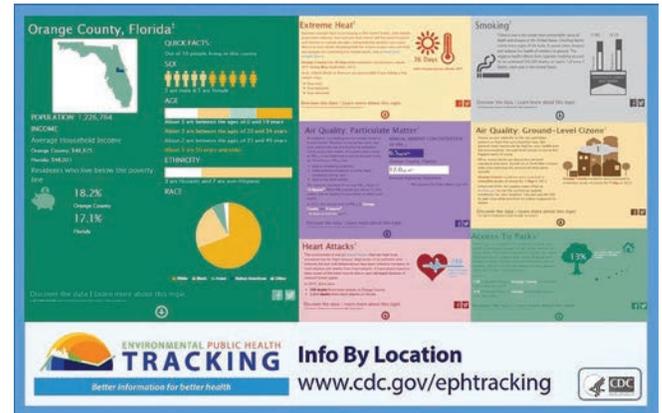

FIGURE 4

Radon Communication Toolkit Offers Customizable Infographics in Response to Audience Feedback
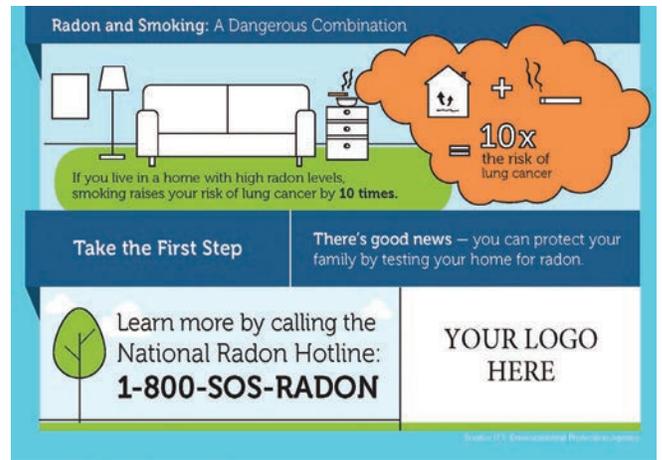
Radon Communication Toolkit can be used to increase awareness of the dangers of radon exposure and smoking. The toolkit was built on materials developed by eight states. These states used Tracking data to bring awareness to the health hazards of radon and smoking through visualization, targeted communication messages, and Radon Awareness Month outreach. CDC tested the draft toolkit with several states and learned that a customizable format would increase the toolkit's use and value.

We designed the toolkit with environmental public health professionals and health educators in mind. It helps them
- create a framework for targeted communication activities and
- focus messages for specific audiences.

The toolkit includes a fact sheet, press release, shareable images, infographics, and social media content—all in one place. The materials can be used as is or customized for specific audiences. Users can add quotes, change regional information, update contact information, and use alternate main messages or branding to highlight a particular radon awareness event (Figure 4). State health departments can use the toolkit to develop statewide radon initiatives, organize local community events, or build social media campaigns.

Communication Quick Links

- Clear Communication Index: www.cdc.gov/ccindex

- National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network Data Visualization Tools: www.cdc.gov/ephtracking

- Environmental Health Specialists Network Plain Language Summaries: www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/ehsnet/ plain_language

- Radon Communication Toolkit: www.cdc.gov/radon

- Preparedness and Safety Messaging for Hurricanes, Flooding, and Similar Disasters: www.cdc.gov/cpr/ readiness/hurricane_messages.htm

FIGURE **5**

Preparedness and Safety Messaging Document Helps Officials Quickly Create and Tailor Health Communication Products

Preparedness and Safety Messaging for Hurricanes, Flooding, and Similar Disasters

Hurricanes, floods, and similar disasters can have long-lasting effects on communities. After a weather incident, communities face a wide range of physical, mental, and environmental risks, making it crucial to deliver health and safety information quickly. While CDC offers plenty of information and resources available to the public online, trying to navigate through these resources can be cumbersome—especially when time is limited!

Public health and emergency response officials are under high pressure to get critical prevention information out promptly to affected communities. For that reason, CDC developed a national preparedness resource, *Preparedness and Safety Messaging for Hurri-* *canes, Flooding, and Similar Disasters* (Figure 5). The document contains predeveloped messages on preparedness, response, and recovery. Key messaging topics include food and water safety, carbon monoxide poisoning, and mold. The easy-to-navigate document includes an interactive table of contents that allows users to find the message they need quickly. Officials can use the resource to create and tailor a wide range of communication products, including social media messages, fact sheets, infographics, press releases, and more. It is available in both English and Spanish.

Start Writing!

Your program has important things to say. We hope this information helps you get your message across. ▟▟▟

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Nielsen Norman Group. (1997). *How people read on the web: The eyetracking evidence*. Retrieved from https://www.nngroup.com/reports/how-people-read-web-eyetracking-evidence/

Did You Know?

Septic systems can be damaged and might fail to operate correctly after a disaster. Ensuring that these systems function properly is essential to providing safe waste disposal for millions of U.S. residents, yet there can be a lack of standard safety protocols for using septic systems after disasters occur. NEHA has worked with subject matter experts and national partners to develop a toolkit with guidance documents for different types of disasters such as hurricanes and flooding, wildfires, earthquakes, freezing temperatures, and power outages. Access the toolkit at www.neha.org/eh-topic/preparedness-response-septic-systems.