

CREATING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

This document is a part of the Behaviour Change Toolkit (People in Need, 2017). You can access it at [this link](#).

Irrespective of whether your strategy aims to change behaviours through influencing policy makers, increasing the accessibility of services, providing people with required skills, or changing social norms, your success always depends on how effectively your activities communicate the **messages that you have designed based on the Bridges to Activities**.¹ Unfortunately for many development projects, their communication strategies are often not as effective as we would hope, especially due to them being:

- × **Superficial:** The behaviour change activities sometimes purely state the behaviours and say why they are important, without addressing the actual barriers to practicing the behaviours.
- × **Poorly targeted:** Instead of focusing on those people who most need the messages, they target everyone.
- × **Authoritarian rather than empathetic:** Communication activities often tell people what to do and how to run their lives, rather than creating ways for people to 'discover' the benefits of a behaviour by themselves.
- × **Long-term rather than short-term focused:** Whereas people care about tangible and preferably immediate benefits, we frequently highlight benefits that might (not) come (e.g. *"your chickens are less likely to die"*); or come only after several years of efforts (e.g. *"using fuel-efficient stoves reduces erosion"*).
- × **Negative rather than positive:** Frequently we emphasize the dangers instead of the positive benefits of (not) following a certain behaviour! (e.g. emphasizing diseases instead of the benefits of washing hands).
- × **Focusing on facts, not emotions:** Despite our behaviour being driven by both rational and emotional factors, messages often emphasize the rational arguments and do not effectively work with people's emotions, such as their desires, social status, confidence or simply "feeling good".
- × **Too complicated:** Instead of promoting specifics like *"adding kale and eggs to children's porridge"*, we ask mothers to *"make children's diet more diverse by using more food groups"*. Communication materials also often provide too much information, decreasing the clarity of what people are actually supposed to do.

As we can see, the most common problems are in **WHAT and HOW we communicate**. Let's now have a look at how we can make our communication better:

1) WHAT WE COMMUNICATE

What do you do when you hear a recommendation that you feel is not relevant or useful to your current situation? If you are like most other people, you do a simple thing: ignore it. The people whom our projects aim to help behave in exactly the same way: **if they feel that the provided advice is not helpful or too difficult to act upon, they do not use it**. The problem usually is not in their unwillingness to improve their lives but in our inability to understand people's most pressing problems and offer solutions that they can use.

For example, nutrition projects commonly raise women's awareness on the importance of breastfeeding. However, many mothers know that exclusive breastfeeding is good for their babies. What they need most is someone who 1) **understands what prevents them** from exclusive breastfeeding (e.g. lacking time, need to resume employment, having sore nipples, perception of not producing enough milk) and 2) **supports them in addressing these barriers** (e.g. by providing counselling, asking husbands to help with household chores).

Ensure that each message directly addresses a specific Bridge to Activities.

Therefore, when designing your messages, the single most important thing is that **each message directly addresses a specific Bridge to Activities** (which you defined based on the formative research you conducted). For example, if your Bridge to Activities is: *"Increase the perception that feeding children a variety of meals is affordable"*, your message can be: *"It is not expensive. Even you can feed your child a healthy diet!"*

By omitting this step, you risk wasting your energy and resources on communicating messages that do not really help your priority group to adopt the behaviour you promote. As much as possible, make sure that your messages are pretested among your priority group ([see chapter on pretesting](#)). While this step does take some time, nothing is preventing you from including these activities into your project description, time plan and budget.

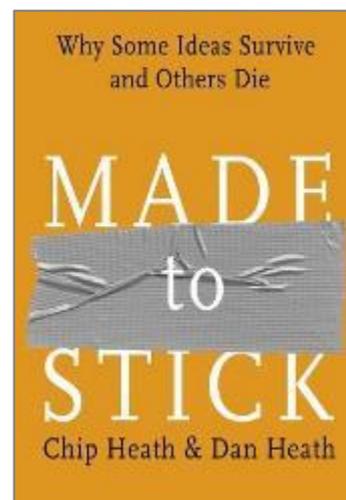
"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

George Bernard Shaw

¹ Bridges to Activities are **definitions of the changes your project needs to achieve in order to address the barriers** that prevent people from practicing the desired behaviours (for example, *"to increase the availability of affordable vegetable seeds"*). These "bridges" are links between the identified barriers and the project activities, ensuring that the each activity is clearly addressing a specific barrier. For more information about defining the Bridges of Activities, read page 11 of [PIN \(2017\) Behaviour Change Toolkit](#).

2) HOW WE COMMUNICATE

By now, we know what we want to communicate but the question is how to do it in a way that motivates people to act upon it? Brothers Chip and Dan Heath analysed the most effective messages from the commercial and non-profit sector and in their excellent book *Made to Stick* published **six elements that make your message “sticky” - interesting enough for people to notice it, understand it, care about it, remember it, and act upon it.**ⁱⁱ



THE MOST EFFECTIVE MESSAGES ARE:

- **SIMPLE:** “Simplify your message as much as you can; think about how you can trim it down to its core, with nothing extra. If your audience remembers nothing else from your communications, **what is the one key message you want them to retain?**”ⁱⁱⁱ Especially if your message is likely to receive only fleeting attention (e.g. due to being a poster or on radio), reduce it to eight words or less which communicate the key fact, benefit, or action you want the audience to take away. Your message has value if it motivates and **helps people take concrete action.**
- **UNEXPECTED:** If you want to get someone’s attention, show something about your issue that is counterintuitive and surprising. Surprise is triggered when the way we think things are fails, and it motivates us to try to understand why the failure happened (“*Why is something not the way I thought?!*”). People want this “*Huh?*” effect to be followed by an “*Aha!*” experience. While this helps to **generate people’s initial interest**, we also need to maintain it. According to the “gap theory”, the best way for doing so is to raise people’s curiosity – a situation when we feel there is a gap in our knowledge. To convince people that they need our message (to fill their “gap”) ask an interesting question to which they are unlikely to know the answer.
- **CONCRETE:** As much as possible, do not give general messages, such as “*Protect the environment!*”. The only response you will get is “*Umm, okay, so what EXACTLY am I supposed to do?!*”. **Concrete messages are much easier to remember and act upon.** Therefore, make sure that when hearing or reading a message, people understand what exact action they are asked to take.
- **CREDIBLE:** People must **believe in your message in order to act upon it.** So the question is: What makes people believe ideas? According to the Heath brothers, we believe because:
 - *our family members or friends believe* (that is why peer-to-peer approaches can be so effective)
 - *we have had experience* that led us to believe (e.g. when a farmer sees that the promoted practice works)
 - *we trust authorities* (such as a doctor) or “*anti-authorities*” (such as drug addict who decided to quit)
 - *the message has “internal credibility”* – adding vivid details (e.g. about a place/ person/ context) or engaging statistics (e.g. comparing one thing with another) makes your message more trustworthy
- **EMOTIONS:** The goal of making messages “emotional” is to make people care – because that is when they are most likely to take action. The best way to do that is to **appeal to the things that really matter to them**, to find a convincing answer to their question: “*Okay, so what is in it for me?*” The fact that *you* know why people should care does not mean that *they* feel the same. Use your formative research to understand what people really value (the last question of the BA asks about Universal Motivators).
- **STORY:** “*Stories tend to include many of the “sticky” elements already listed: providing a simplified version of the message, showing an unexpected twist, making an intangible issue concrete, offering credibility through course and details, and evoking emotions.*”^v They have the remarkable capacity to allow us to “*perfink*” – perceive, feel, and think, all at once.^{vi} There is no need for us to start inventing new stories – in the countries where we work, there are plenty of interesting stories of people who manage to overcome difficulties or who successfully tried new behaviours. The key is to find them.^{vii}

UNIVERSAL MOTIVATORS		
<i>The things which motivate people to act are unique to each culture and person, however, some are commonly present across different contexts:</i>		
Love	Success	Positive Self-Image
Recognition	Status	Social Acceptance
Pleasure	Security	Peace of Mind
Freedom	Comfort	Power ^{iv}

When you design your key message – for a poster, community event, radio show or a meeting with decision makers – check it against the Heath brothers’ scorecard.^{viii} **Effective messages do not always need to tick all the boxes;** however, it may help you to realize what your message may be missing in order to be strong.

SCORECARD			
<i>Is your message ... ?</i>			
Simple	<input type="checkbox"/>	Credible	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unexpected	<input type="checkbox"/>	Emotional	<input type="checkbox"/>
Concrete	<input type="checkbox"/>	Story	<input type="checkbox"/>

LANGUAGE MATTERS

The language we use has a massive influence on whether people pay attention to our messages and act upon them. To avoid the most common mistakes, use some of the following tips:

- **Personalize your message** by addressing the person directly through the use of the word YOU and the imperative verb tense. For example, say: “Go to your health centre if your child has blood in her/ his stool” rather than “Women should visit a health centre when their child has blood in her/ his stool”.
- **Start with a question** to pull people into the topic if you are sure that they will answer “yes”. For example: “Want smart and healthy kids? Feed them eggs at least once a week!”
- **Use positive appeals** rather than negative messages. Show what is great about the product or behaviour. Instead of saying “Do not deliver your baby at home”, highlight the benefits of delivering in a health facility.
- **Focus on one or a small number of points**, especially if you have a limited space (e.g. on billboards) or time (e.g. in a video). Using one strong message is often more effective than squeezing in 3 points. If you are developing a series of communications (e.g. radio shows), focus each one on a single message.
- **Refer to cumulative benefits** - for example, showing how much people can save after a year of using fuel-efficient stoves gives quite a powerful argument for doing so.
- **Adjust to the reading level of your priority group** by using sentences which are short, contain simple words which you are sure the audience knows and are written in a large font. Since many people cannot read, the core message in your materials needs to clearly come out of the pictures they contain.^{ix}



As a part of its support to developing a local market for veterinary services, PIN Cambodia used a banner promoting poultry vaccinations, saying: “Vaccinating chickens helped me earn more than a million riels per year”. It offered farmers tangible benefits and appealed to their desire to make their animal production more profitable.

CAN YOU LEARN FROM COMMERCIAL ADVERTISING?

Commercial companies have decades of experience in marketing the use of health services, agricultural inputs, soaps, contraception or insurance – i.e. exactly the same “behaviours” as our projects promote. Their advertisements managed to motivate millions of people to use condoms, try new types of seeds or use health insurance. Many of these successful ads were developed based on the results of lots of formative research, and NGOs can do the same. If you want to get practical inspiration for how to “advertise” the behaviours you promote, check the **Annex: The 12 Types of Adds**.

IMPORTANCE OF PILOTING AND PRETESTING

You spent weeks if not months of hard work on trying to understand the behaviours being promoted by your project from the priority group's perspective; finding effective activities to overcoming the identified barriers; and designing your messages in a way that motivates people to act upon them. By now, you feel like you know quite a lot and you are keen to start implementing your behaviour change activities.

However, this is exactly **the point when the biggest failure can happen**: because you did a lot of research, thinking, and creative work, you might assume that if you and your team find the activities and communication materials clear, attractive and useful, other people will feel the same. In practice, this sometimes does not happen: people do not respond to our messages as expected and our activities do not deliver the desired effect. **One of the best ways for preventing such failures is to pilot our activities and pre-test our communication materials.** The most basic methods for doing so are not very complicated, so let's have a look at how to do it:

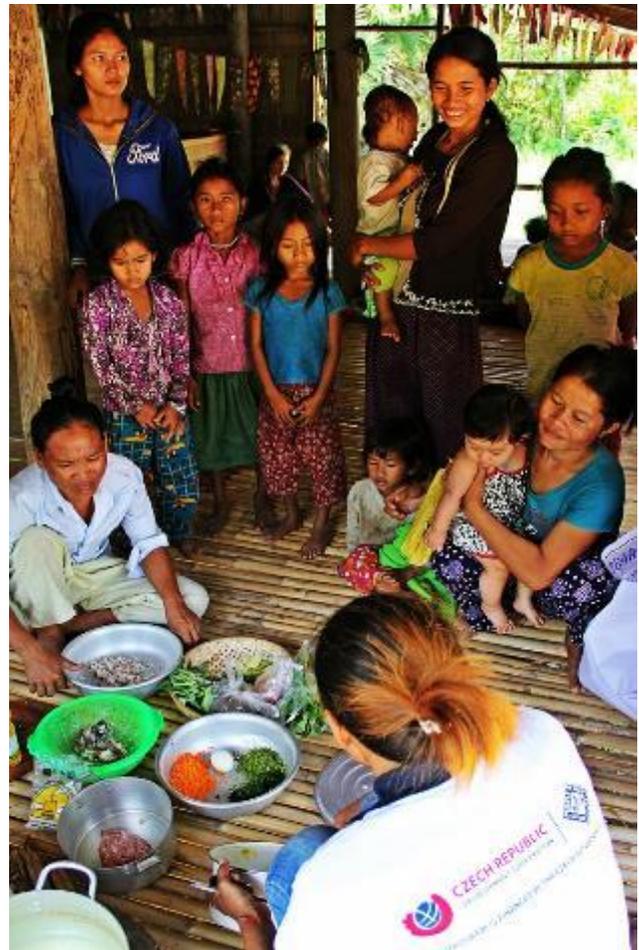
Even if you have limited resources, DO NOT SKIP this step – it is always better to have effective activities and communication materials later than using mediocre ones now.

PILOTING OUR ACTIVITIES

Development projects typically consist of a limited set of activities that are implemented in the same way across many different locations. For example, trainings promoting nutritious food for young children might be implemented in 150 villages. In practice, this means that if the way we designed or manage the trainings encounters a challenge (e.g. children do not like the meals we promote), **we risk making the same mistake up to 150 times** – which means wasting a lot of effort and resources. The same applies to any other type of activity that we implement at a larger scale.

The best way to prevent such failure is to pilot the activity: implement it initially in a few locations only and scale it up once you addressed the identified weaknesses. The following tips will help you to ensure effective piloting:

- Prepare a simple **checklist of all the main steps and principles** of the activity (e.g. 1: facilitator first asks women about their existing recipes; 2: women are encouraged to say which foods are locally available; 3: ...) and then use it when supervising its implementation.
- After having piloted the activity in a few different locations, **organize a focus group discussion** with the activity's participants focusing on its benefits (*What was the activity good for?*); relevance (*How relevant was it for addressing the difficulties people are facing?*); credibility (*Did they trust in what the activity was promoting?*); motivation to change (*As a result of the activity, are they motivated to take any specific action?*); remaining barriers (*Is there any reason why they cannot follow what the activity promoted?*) and weaknesses (*What could have been done better/ should be changed?*).
- After the discussion, **introduce a performance-based task** assessing to what extent participants are able to use the newly acquired knowledge or skills (for example, to describe three nutritious meals for young children or to prepare an oral rehydration solution for treating diarrhoea).
- Discuss with the staff implementing the activity what did and did not go well and what exact action(s) specific staff will take to address the identified weaknesses.
- If you want to keep monitoring the quality of the activity's implementation, revise and keep using the checklist that you developed during the piloting stage (see the first bullet point).



By piloting and subsequently improving the design and implementation of your activities, you will:

- increase the likelihood that the full-scale implementation is done in good quality (is likely to **be effective**)
- **know how the target population responds** to your activity
- be able to improve the allocation of your time and resources (be **more efficient**)
- know what potential **weaknesses you need to supervise** (e.g. through using a standardized checklist)

PRETESTING OUR MESSAGES AND MATERIALS

How do we learn whether people are likely to pay attention to our information, education, and communication (IEC) materials and the messages they include, understand them correctly and find them motivating? The best way is to **ask the people for whom they were designed** for their opinion concerning some of the following “quality factors” (you do not always need to assess all of them).

- *Comprehension*: Do people understand the main point(s)? Do they understand every word used?
- *Relevance*: Do people feel that the materials were made for people like them? Can they use the information in their own lives?
- *Noticeability*: Do the materials attract people’s attention? Do they notice them?
- *Memorability*: Do people remember the materials’ messages after having seen them once?
- *Credibility*: Do people trust the content of the message and its perceived source?
- *Acceptability*: Do people feel that the materials fit the culture? Are they sensitive enough?
- *Knowledge, attitude or belief change*: After being exposed to the materials, do people think that they learned anything new or that it motivated them to do something?
- *Strong and weak points*: According to the respondents, what are the best things about your materials? If they had to change something, what would it be?

Out of the range of methods available, **group interviews offer a relatively quick and easy way to pre-test our messages and communication materials.**² These are made up of between 6 and 10 people from our priority groups with whom we discuss opinions on the “quality factors”. The participants need to share similar characteristics (e.g. all are male farmers from the same community). If you target more priority groups (e.g. mothers and fathers), discuss their opinions in separate groups. When conducting focus groups:

- make sure that *everyone can see or hear* the material or media you are assessing
- *rotate the order* in which you present different versions of the materials in each focus group
- ask for a *general reaction first* before you start asking about specific details
- if you need to decide between several graphics, *show people the pictures by themselves without the text* and ask what message they think the graphics convey
- after showing all versions, you can ask people to *rank them in order of preference*
- *encourage critical feedback* if only positive feedback is being given

Be aware that **you do not need to address all the feedback you receive**: some may be irrelevant to the strategy’s goal and other feedback might just be bad advice. Pretesting the materials with more people can help you to identify which issues are coming up repeatedly and are worth your attention.^x

If your time is short, use a [Straight to the Point Checklist for Evaluating IEC Materials](#). This enables you to review the quality of the materials based on seven most essential criteria. While you can evaluate certain aspects of the materials on your own, keep in mind that you are probably better educated, more literate, more economically secure, and perhaps more urban than many of the people for whom the materials were designed. Always **involve at least several people for whom the materials were designed in the testing process.**^{xi}

² Other useful pretesting methods include: intercept interviews, self-administered questionnaires, crowdsourcing, readability testing, usability testing or expert and gatekeeper reviews are all useful pretesting methods.

ANNEX: THE 12 TYPES OF ADDS

In 1978, Donald Gunn, a creative director for a major advertising agency, decided to take a yearlong sabbatical to study the best of the thousands of different TV ads. Gradually he realized that **the vast majority of ads are based on one or a combination of several of the 12 “master formats” of ads.**

One might think that conclusions based on 40 year old TV commercials have little to offer to the modern-day communication strategies development practitioners use. However, the opposite is true – as you can see in the examples below, the following 12 formats are even today a very relevant source of inspiration for our behaviour change communication:

1. **The Demo:** This format *visually demonstrates a special aspect of the product's features and capabilities*, which provide a specific benefit (for example, families enjoying a bright light by using a solar panel).
2. **Show the Need or Problem:** The next format first *demonstrates a problem* the target audience faces, highlights the need to address it and then offers an effective solution. For example, it raises the discomfort related to cooking on firewood (related to its collection, smoke, etc.), emphasizes the urge to solve it now and then introduces the promoted alternative (for example, biogas cookers).
3. **Problem as Symbol, Analogy or Exaggerated Graphic:** Ads using this format show the problem (which the promoted behaviour solves) in a way that *makes the point symbolically* – for example, scary germs on our hands bringing different diseases but running away once we wash our hands with soap.
4. **Comparison:** This format focuses on demonstrating that an *alternative behaviour brings you more benefits* than the current behaviour. It discounts the benefits of the existing behaviour (of using a certain product, service, approach, etc.) and highlights the advantages of practicing the promoted behaviour. This approach is used, for example, in sanitation marketing campaigns.
5. **The Exemplary Story:** The fifth format is *a strong story* where your target audience would practice the promoted behaviour and be very glad for it. For example, a young couple in love drives on a motorbike, enjoying great landscapes when suddenly they are hit by an oncoming car. The helmet that the passenger used (i.e. the promoted behaviour) has saved her life and their loving relationship happily continues.
6. **The Benefit Causes Story:** This format uses a story where we *see the benefits first* (such as happy children) and only later learn that the promoted behaviour (such as using ORS for treating child diarrhoea) was the source of the benefits. The ad does not show the behaviour (of using a certain product, service, approach, etc.) until the very end, setting it up as the answer to why something is the (very attractive, positive, etc.) way as we saw it in the opening scene.^{xii} This format is less feasible in print ads.
7. **Tell It:** The seventh format is based on an *“ordinary” person recommending* the promoted behaviour and highlighting its benefits. The person should be either someone the audience can relate to (e.g. an ordinary looking mum) or someone who is respected (e.g. a doctor). The person can talk either directly to the audience or to a fictional friend or neighbour.
8. **Ongoing Characters and Celebrities:** Ads using this format engage *well-known people* in promoting the behaviour's benefits. The fact that, for example, a famous singer practices the promoted behaviour can motivate our target audience to do the same. At the same time, whenever they see the person (e.g. on TV), they are more likely to recall the promoted behaviour.
9. **Benefit as Symbol, Analogy or Exaggerated Graphic:** Similar to the third format that focuses on highlighting the problem, this format *demonstrates the benefit* of the product in a metaphorical way. For example, young children are effortlessly lifting heavy weights as a sign of their strength resulting from eating the promoted nutritious meals.
10. **Associated User Imagery:** Ads using this format show the types of *people the target audience aspires to be like* (or a lifestyle they wish to have), such as good mothers, cool-looking teens or anti-authorities ('rebels'). These people demonstrate the behaviour your intervention promotes and your hope is that the target audience will replicate it (i.e. behave as its 'models').
11. **Unique Personality Property:** This format highlights something unique about the product or service you encourage your priority group to use, such as its place of origin, name or characteristics that the target audience is likely to find attractive.
12. **Parody or Borrowed Format:** Ads using this format are based on making fun of a well-known movie, TV show, or even another advertisement with a new twist.^{xiii}

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