10 Principles for Effective Prevention Messaging

We are working to strengthen our messaging in the sexual violence prevention movement. It can be a struggle to combat the misconceptions the public has about sexual violence. In our roles, we can help the public see that sexual violence is a social problem. Below are tips to think about when creating a message. Remember, it is not necessary to use all of these tips in every message or campaign.

Over time, the messaging strategy may need to be changed to reflect the changes in the audience (for example: from raising awareness to bystander intervention). Based on research and experience, here are 10 tips for advocates on effective sexual violence prevention messaging:

1. Reflect the language of the target audience

Identify and understand who your target audience is in terms of diversity, education, culture, knowledge, and experiences. The audience needs to be able to identify with the message (Potter, Moynihan, & Stapleton, 2010). Be clear, concise, and use plain language that resonates with your audience

Example: Framing a bystander campaign for a college-aged audience may include information on how to be an engaged bystander at a party, while a campaign focused on the workplace may include how to intervene when you witness sexual harassment.

2. Speak to the audience's core values

Determine the message for the target audience that speaks to their core values. By connecting issues to a person's values, they are more likely to support the issue (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation & Movement Advancement Project, 2008). In addition, a FrameWorks Institute study found that "the public is moved by appeals to compassion and basic human rights" (FrameWorks Institute, 2013, p. 5).

Example: Preventing sexual violence creates healthy families and healthy communities.

People are emotionally and morally invested in keeping families healthy. Talking about prevention in terms of building and sustaining healthy communities can tap into the value that many people share.

3. State facts and statistics

State facts and statistics and stay away from restating myths (Cook & Lewandowsky, 2012). Research has shown that when an audience is presented with evidence to debunk a myth, they will remember the myth, not the fact (O'Neil & Morgan, 2010). In your messaging, present factual information to help reinforce the knowledge, skills, and action you are working to mobilize among audience members.

Example: One in five women have been raped in their lifetime, and more than 50% of those women were raped by a current or former intimate partner (Black et al., 2011).

4. Use a positive message

Messages should be positive, nonbiased, and emotionally compelling. People want to hold onto something hopeful and be part of a solution. Use images that are in line with the message, and portray positive trauma-informed images.

Example: Sexual violence is preventable. Let's talk about it.

5. Be action oriented and offer solutions

Provide options of things for people to do. This helps them feel involved and like they are a part of the solution. Offer a menu of options for the audience so they feel empowered to pick the action that reflects their knowledge and comfort level.

Example: Learn more about sexual violence, attend an event during Sexual Assault Awareness Month, or volunteer at your local rape crisis center.

6. Tell a story

Recent research has found that telling the whole story in a short concise way is the most effective way to get your message across to audiences (O'Neil, Simon, & Haydon, 2014). Include the problem, underlying issues or contributing factors, and offer solutions.

Example: I began working in sexual violence because I believed I could make a difference. I still believe this, but change is only possible when everyone plays a part. This is why it's important for our community to take a stand.

7. Promote positive social norms

Sexual violence happens, in part, because of a culture and social norms that support and encourage such behavior. By promoting positive social norms, such as safety, equality, respect, and an intolerance of violence, we can prevent sexual violence (Davis, Parks, & Cohen, 2010). Media campaigns can be used to convey messages about healthy behaviors

FIVE DAMAGING SOCIAL NORMS

1. Objectifying and oppressing people

2. Promoting violence and blaming of victims

3. Promoting power over another

4. Promoting damaging views of gender roles

5. Supporting and promoting secrecy and silence of violence

(Davis, Parks, & Cohen, 2010)

and challenge unhealthy and damaging social norms (World Health Organization, 2009).

Example: Be an engaged bystander. When you see a person making another person uncomfortable, step up and say something.

8. Link sexual violence to oppression

Sexual violence is related to oppression such as sexism, racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism and ableism. These oppressions are linked to the social norms that make up rape culture (Guy, 2008).

Example: Many people do not only experience sexual violence, they also experience layers of oppression. This can make it harder for victims of sexual violence to come forward and find the help and support that is responsive to their individual needs.

9. Present sexual violence as a community problem, not an individual problem

As advocates, we know sexual violence is a community problem, not a problem of individual survivors. There is a disconnect between what advocates know and what the public knows in terms of who is impacted by sexual violence. Generally, the public believes that sexual violence is an individual problem that impacts individual people, and occurs because of the actions of individual people (O'Neil & Morgan, 2010). In reality, sexual violence is a community problem that impacts everyone and, through societal norms change, can be prevented.

Example: Sexual violence impacts everyone. We all have an active role in preventing sexual violence.

10. Don't underestimate the power of social media

The use of social media networks, such as Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, etc., can reach a wide audience. Studies show that 73% of adults online use social networking sites, with Facebook the most commonly used. Among young people, Twitter and Instagram are most commonly used (Duggan, 2013).

Example: Help get the word out about Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Write a Letter to the Editor for #SAAM. Sample at www.nsvrc.org/saam.

Key resources about social media

Social media advocacy: Five influential steps
http://eadvocate.wordpress.com/social-media-advocacy-six-influential-steps/

National Sexual Violence Resource Center's Social media toolkit

http://nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/saam_2014_social-medial-toolkit.pdf

Key resources about messaging

Key Best Practices for Effective Sexual Violence Public Education Campaigns: A Summary

http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/sites/default/files/Best%20Practices.pdf

Checklist for Effective Sexual Violence Public Education Campaigns
http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/sites/default/files/Checklist.pdf

Preventing Sexual Violence: A Communications Approach, Part 1
http://www.preventconnect.org/2014/04/sv-communications/

Working Upstream: Skills for Social Change
http://bmsg.org/sites/default/files/bmsg_handbook_working_upstream.pdf

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The Art and Science of Framing an Issue
http://www.lgbtmap.org/file/art-and-science-of-framing-an-issue.pdf

Framing public issues
http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf

Key resources for journalists

National Sexual Violence Resource Center Media Packet: Info & Stats for Journalists
www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/Publications_NSVRC_Media-Packet.pdf

Reporting on Sexual Violence
http://www.nsvrc.org/elearning/reporting-on-sexual-violence

Reporting on Rape and Sexual Violence: A Media Toolkit for Local and National Journalists to Better Media Coverage
http://www.chitaskforce.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Chicago-Taskforce-Media-Toolkit.pdf
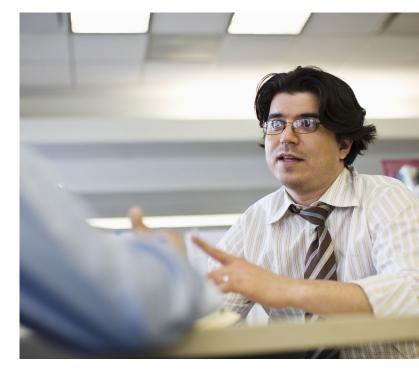
Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse in News Coverage
http://www.bmsg.org/about/projects/analysis-of-child-sexual-abuse%20in-news-coverage

Writing about Gender-Based Violence & Title IX: A Guide for Journalists & Editors
http://knowyourix.org/writing-about-gender-based-violence-and-title-ix-a-guide-for-journalists-and-editors/

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