

Existing government communication is not making the public any healthier

From push to pull

When government campaigns fail to change behaviour, calls for tougher measures like (negative) financial incentives get louder. But how effective is this? A recommendation for a social network approach.

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We increasingly see government campaigns designed to influence individual behaviour. Understandably, because issues like saving energy, smoking or obesity have far-reaching social consequences and a huge economic impact. But only a massive shift in behaviour will make any difference at a national level. So the government keeps on sending the public unambiguous messages. 'Smoking? Not in front of the children' and 'Eat by example'. When government campaigns fail to have the desired effect, calls for tougher measures, usually through the introduction of financial incentives, get louder. If people don't listen, then they have to feel the consequences, is the idea. But is this effective? If people are not getting the message, does that mean communication is a waste of time? Or should we take another look at our traditional methods?

Norms are dictated from above, but change has to be realised bottom-up, created by individuals at micro-level. Macro and micro: there is a huge gap between the two. Interfering with people's lifestyles is a delicate matter, which is quickly seen as a violation of personal freedom. Does the macro-economic scale of a problem justify direct interference in the personal lives of the public? Does an additional cost of 500 million euros a year in healthcare due to obesity justify meddling in the personal choices of obese people?

There is a lot of criticism of the government's paternalistic tendencies. Public campaigns are becoming more and more compelling, but this doesn't make them particularly more effective. Health messages are too general, while the individual problem is too specific. Simply broadcasting messages apparently does not have the desired effect, but is there an effective alternative?

Ask the target group

Of course there are exceptions. Wonderful initiatives which strike a chord with the public and produce great results. Unfortunately, it is difficult to fit such initiatives into national mass media campaigns designed to change behaviour 'The Netherlands is 70 million kilos too heavy', 'Smoking puts x% of the population at y% risk of getting cancer': the statistics are frightening, but do they support change on an individual level?

Today's top-down approach neglects the way the target group thinks. It is the sender's own set of references which set the tone and not that of the target group. It seems simple, but good communication on the part of the sender is to think like the receiver. Let's focus on the latter.

Do you know what it feels like not being able to put your own socks on? To be tired all the time? To never be able to sit comfortably? How

does someone feel if they can't take the children to school because of a hangover? What it means to someone when their only friend is a joint? Because this is the level that touches people's lives. The level at which you have to take action if you want to have any effect. The costs of an unhealthy lifestyle, which are quantifiable at macro-level, are tangible at micro-level every day, both emotionally and rationally.

We are trying to resolve this by proposing a new approach to communication. One in which the government and the public work together, in which communication and participation go hand in hand. To do this, roles at all levels need to be thoroughly reviewed. Let the receiver become the sender. Turn the sender into a facilitator.

Motivation

The first step in finding an effective approach to undesired behaviour is to recognise that there is no single cause. Target groups are not identical, nor are their motives to change. If you want to change behaviour, you will get nowhere with general messages. You have to get away from mass media campaigns and find out what motivates individuals. You won't achieve this by just gathering information about the target group, you have to get to know the people from the target group as well and involve them in the process of change. Talk to the people you so badly want to change, teach them how to find out what motivates them and see which alternatives could be successful. Allow the target group to help think about the problem. Or better still: let them formulate the question. That substantially increases the chance that the answer will mean something to them.

In marketing terms, that means shifting from push to pull marketing. Focus on the individual rather than on the uniform message. Stop trying to imagine what a junkie would understand.

Ask him what he needs, why he wants to change and what kind of support he thinks he needs. Ask him who could play a role to make this happen.

Infectious

People with obesity, would rather not be overweight – obesity is hugely psychologically and physically limiting. Being overweight is much less of a choice than people think. The same goes for smoking or drinking. Half of the burden on disease could be prevented by influencing environmental factors. We eat whatever is produced (too much fat, sugar and salt); we exercise too little because we no longer need to move to provide for ourselves. That does not mean we can sit back and relax, pointing the finger at car manufacturers and the nutrition industry. It means that we really have to involve people at all levels. To start with people in the target group and those who influence them.

The local environment plays a key role in changing behaviour. The network is highly 'infectious'. People who are surrounded by friends that are overweight have more chance of becoming overweight themselves and less chance of successfully losing weight. Because what is fat? The group norm prevails and determines what is consumed. Whoever deviates too far from this norm cannot depend on receiving support. Can you keep your weight down if cakes are always on offer at birthday parties? If cola, beer and barbeques are synonymous with 'fun'? Who or what will help if you really want to lose weight? Your network – up to the third level – determines your chance of success. Consciously or unconsciously, they weigh up whether your norm deserves support. And that is why the whole network has to be involved in behavioural change and in gathering the strength to carry that change collectively. Only when the collective norm shifts, is it possible for the individual to change.

No outcast

Each unique individual has universal desires. People want to feel good. They want to be able to participate, they do not want to be an outcast, or be ashamed. That is the level at which you have to intervene. It is incredibly important to be and remain part of the group. Ranking the target group as part of your research into the group increases the chance of being effective. What interests play a role? At what cost and what are the benefits? How can a social group benefit: physically, rationally, emotionally and financially? For whom and by whom?

If you want to achieve permanent behavioural change, you have to use specific messages for specific groups. You have to opt for communication methods that are relevant and close to home. Which can be implemented in the social-cultural context and the daily lives of the target group. There where behaviour is influenced, reasserted or even rejected. Effective intervention requires a cohesive approach using various methods, which by steering and motivating, have greater reach than traditional publicity campaigns with leaflets and a website. The whole network has to receive a coherent message. Cooperation at different levels is crucial. Involve the local authority, schools, social services, family doctors and even include the football coach as well as the commercial supermarket, where the manager would love to do more. The next-door neighbour with a golden heart.

Unfortunately communication often gets stuck at the strategy level with logo stickers, a leaflet in three languages and a website. Clients often do not know any better and are frightened off by the investment needed for a new approach. Even though target group participation is winning ground, the costs are often compared with 'last year's campaign', not with the costs of effectively reaching people, or better still:

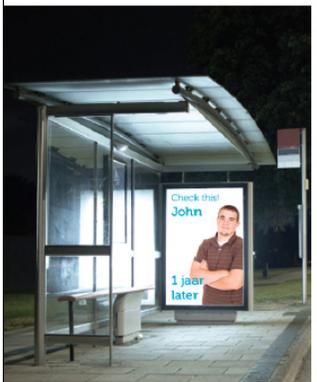
effectively changing behaviour. So opportunities are lost on various fronts.

Message design

Good project management is essential to get and keep everyone on the same wavelength. The organisation surrounding different parties requires a lot of attention from the communication manager. But his most important job is getting the message right. More than that he has to present a convincing argument to carry out thorough research. Knowing your target group, its environment and network is of the utmost importance to successfully change behaviour. You really have to involve the target group – in its widest sense – in your communication strategy. Talk to them. Allow them to help put together the messages. Encourage them to really participate. Identify their needs and the desired effect and document the perceived costs and benefits of these needs. Formulate a series of choices and opportunities on the basis of your findings. Good research is the foundation for participation in which the target group itself becomes the sender. Bottom-up instead of top-down. You cannot get closer to more effective communication than that.

Fed by research, the communication manager takes the lead in the message design: finely tuning the messages through exactly the right channels, so that they really get through to their target group. To do this, opt for a limited number of messages and have the courage to leave go of the traditional media mix. It may even be that your next-door neighbour and Hyves are the most ruthless combination to have an impact.

Emilie van Rappard and Hanneke de Bruin together form Opinionators. Opinionators advises in the field of social marketing and commerce on changing and anchoring behaviour.



Case (fictional): tackling obesity in young adults in North Haagsedam

Problem:

55% of young people between 16 and 24 have a BMI > 28

Cause: unbalanced diets with lots of snacks, daily alcohol intake & little exercise

Objective: reducing obesity by 50%; 20% permanently

Outcome of target group research

Context:

- Work: Irregular, temporary work/changing shift work
- Nutrition: Home cooking limited – eat together in front of the TV or on the street
- Housing: Living at home, strong bond with neighbourhood
- Social dynamics: “we accept each other as we are”
- Communication: music, local street culture (“check you later” – Check je laturrr)
- etc.

Obstacles:

- Being healthy has no status (no sport culture, youths hang around on the streets)
- Low level of knowledge about nutrition and health
- Little contact with traditional social services

Motivation:

- Fear of exclusion from the social circuit
- Sense of being ‘short-changed’ – want children to have a better life

Key players in the network:

- John (large posture weighing 114 kg, funny entertaining guy) and Adrian (slightly aggressive, daredevil, trendsetter both in positive and negative sense)
- Mother (don’t touch my mother)
- Jan from the petrol station (knows how to get through to youths)
- Auntie Jans (neighbour from Suriname, motivating force in the neighbourhood)

Method: campaign with ‘local heros’ with John (22-years-old) as figurehead

Multimedia campaign with communication, interaction and intervention geared to neighbourhood level:

- ‘John’-campaign in outdoor advertising (street corners/sports school) – complimented with progressive results and testimonials (“had a difficult time this week”)
- ‘John-supporters’: create a hype around “I support John” using online and offline gadgets (social media, ringtones and event marketing), create John ‘fans’ using wrist bands, tattoos and scooter stickers
- Introduce exercise campaign: “Give your scooter a break”, sports clinics on the street (boxing, capoeira) and local health authority ‘drop in’ center.
- Insight into eating habits: Healthy Eating cooking clinic by Auntie Jans and local shopkeepers, who keep encouraging this behaviour. Cooperation of the local green grocer.
- Involvement of neighbourhood police, family doctors and schools to identify and stimulate target group
- Support for John and his mother by nutritional experts and behavioural psychologists