

Final Report: Ideal Communication Tools

Prepared for
Polk County Health Department



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Goals

The findings in this report are based on a market research project that examined the message and messenger necessary to inform Polk County citizens in the advent of a wide-spread health crisis.

The specific goals of the project included:

- What is the reaction from local citizens on potential messages regarding a communicable disease outbreak?
- How do citizens want to learn about the plans that are in place in the event of a crisis?
- How do citizens want to be informed during a time of crisis?

Methodology

To accomplish these goals, a research project was designed and implemented among Polk County residents, ages 25 and older. Two methodologies were used to gather data. The first was a quantitative research project that included both telephone and web-based interviews. The combination of interviewing techniques allowed a much greater opportunity to contact a representative sample of Polk County residents. As seen in the table below the web-based survey, drawn from a panel of Polk County residents, tended to be comprised of younger (25-44 years old) women.

After completing the web-based portion of the study; a telephone interviewing process, using established quotas, was implemented to ensure the complete sample represented the population, plus or minus the overall margin of error of 4%.

N=	The Sample			
	Population	Total	Web-based	Telephone
		523	299	224
Gender				
Man	48%	46%	25%	75%
Woman	52%	54%	75%	25%
Age-Group				
25-34	19%	23%	33%	9%
35-44	23%	20%	26%	11%
45-54	21%	19%	20%	17%
55-64	14%	14%	13%	16%
65+	23%	25%	8%	47%

Two follow-up focus groups comprised the second portion of the project. The purpose of these two groups was to hear, first hand, the reasoning behind residents' thoughts uncovered in phase I of the project. The first group (N=12) was comprised of Polk County residents who received the flu vaccine within the past year and the second group (N=10) included those who elected not to get the vaccine.

Specific Findings

Residents feel that a health issue can become a major issue in their lives when they believe that the disease could personally affect them. Hearing a warning through the media heightens their awareness, but it does not make it personal, and thus limits action. Hearing a warning from their personal physician, a note home from school with their child, or hearing or seeing the effect in the workplace makes it personal. Overall, residents will not be moved to action, unless the health issue reaches the "personal" level. For example, in the recent flooding many residents recall hearing the warning to get a tetanus shot, but if they did not live or work in the area, or participate in the clean-up effort, they would not seek out the shot.

A sample of the verbatim comments from the quantitative portion of the project on this issue is as follows:

Throughout the year we hear and read about various health issues or disease outbreaks across the United States. Thinking about various health concerns, how do you decide if a health issue is really a major concern to you and/or your family?

"I depend on my family doctor."

"Based on what information my doctor personally provides me."

"Depends on what the outbreak is - for example a flu outbreak would concern me because of our ages."

"I look at the region and what people were doing to be exposed to that particular disease. I also look at the age of the people affected."

"I would just ask my doctor. about it."

"If it effects my immediate family-then action needs to be taken."

"I would see if there are LOCAL problems."

"If the health issue/disease could affect us personally, I would consider that a concern."

Flu Vaccine

The research indicates that 40% of Polk County residents feel they are at major risk to getting influenza, with an additional 53% feeling they are at minor risk to the disease. With the risk so high, you would expect people to take action to limit their risk, but when asked only 50% of the market received the flu vaccine last year. An interesting four in ten of those who feel they are at major risk to influenza did not get the shot. Because of this fact, the focus groups were divided into those who perceived that they were at major risk for getting influenza and either got the flu shot and those who did not.

People who did receive the vaccine most often cited easy accessibility, for example at the workplace, as their primary reason for getting the vaccine.

People who did not get an influenza vaccine cite opposition to the vaccine as ineffective or painful. Comments from the focus groups getting the vaccine is as follows:

Why did you choose NOT to receive the flu vaccine?

"The cost...I don't have insurance."

"There are so many strains of the flu, and these flu shots that are available only protect against 3...not against these 4."

"I decided, roll the dice."

"Save myself the relative pain...the sore arm and the achy feeling for a day or two."

"It made me sick that night, so why should I inoculate myself with a virus and not just take my chances?"

"I actually got the flu last year...suffered through it for two days and then I was fine."

"I don't get the flu."

"Time."

"I'm probably going to get sick anyway, what are the chances it's going to cover the one strain."

"My doctor said I'm a healthy young woman...it's okay that I don't get it."

"It always seems like there is a shortage...a frenzy...I don't want to have to bother with it."

Why did you choose to receive the vaccine?

"I had no idea what a flu shot would cost."

Convenience is a bigger factor than cost

"I thought it would be more expensive."

Convenience, accessibility, affordability

Got the shot at work, it was free, in the doctor's office

"...handy, it's easy, and someone says you ought to do it."

"It's habit for me."

"Why not if it could help me not get the flu?"

"I would definitely not go without it."

"I was in for a physical."

"I worked in health care."

“A necessity.”

“Because of my health condition.”

“Because of my age.”

“I didn’t want to go to the doctor to get it.”

“My doctor’s office actually told me to go to Dahl’s.”

“It’s free at the senior center.”

“It’s an old school thought that [a doctor] was the only person who could administer health care.”

“We are getting a flu shot at the same place where we are buying our groceries.”

“The corporate world has moved from separate vacation and sick time to paid time off... any sick day I miss is a day I can’t take on vacation.”

“People will always come into work sick.”

“If one person gets it, then it’s a plague and everybody gets it.”

“A workplace message could be... we promote a healthy environment around here.”

One of the most significant findings from the focus groups was a twist in the message for getting a flu shot. Respondents mentioned that their business is moving to combining vacation time and sick time into one unit, personal time off. In the previous system, getting sick cut into an employee’s sick time. However, for many employees, now sick time has limited or no accrual, therefore losing sick time affects or benefits the business much more than the person. Thus, with personal time off, a day saved by not getting sick translates into a possible vacation day or personal day off. Therefore, a possible message for today’s business environment is “Get a flu shot and save a personal time off day.” This message fits with what was learned in the quantitative research regarding how people decide if a health issue is a concern – again, making it personal has significantly high impact.

Risk from various diseases

Findings from the focus groups indicate that people receive and evaluate input on the seriousness of a disease from many sources. But similar to the findings from the quantitative research, people most often evaluate diseases based on their perception of how it will effect them personally. Focus groups commented included:

How do you decide if a health issue is really a major risk to you and/or your family?

“Long-term effects.”

“Contagious factor, how is it transmitted... what are your risks of actually contracting it?”

“The severity... what the cure is, if there is one.”

“Who is in jeopardy of getting it?”

“I believe that doctors, media, pharmaceutical companies exaggerate situations in order to make more money.

“I can tell the difference between ‘this might happen’ versus... an actual risk.”

“Which demographic is affected

“Exposure, incubation period, how it is transmitted

“How many of us can even remember when we had the mumps shot?”

“Who remembers their own medical history anyway?” (vaccines, etc.)

“Long-term effects.”

“Contagious factor, how is it transmitted... what are your risks of actually contracting it?”

“The severity... what the cure is, if there is one.”

“I get a printout from the doctor when my kids get a vaccination that tells me everything I need to know... but I feel like that’s the only way I have any information on that.”

As noted previously, people know they are at risk to influenza. The other major risk disease is bio-terrorism. The rest of the diseases are perceived to have limited risk to Polk County residents. It is important to note that a significant number of residents do not know the risk, high or low, associated with Pandemic, SARS and Monkey Pox.

Risk Associated with Various Diseases

N=523

	Major risk Risk	Minor Risk	Not at all	Don't Know
Influenza	<u>40%</u>	53%	5%	2%
Bio-terrorism	<u>33%</u>	45%	15%	7%
Pandemic	19%	36%	22%	<u>23%</u>
Anthrax	16%	47%	31%	6%
Small Pox	12%	48%	33%	7%
SARS	12%	32%	28%	<u>28%</u>
Tuberculosis	11%	61%	25%	3%
Measles	4%	60%	34%	2%
Mumps	4%	53%	40%	3%
Monkey pox	3%	18%	30%	<u>49%</u>

Older residents, 55+, tend to feel they are at higher risk on almost all diseases. The exceptions are the Measles and Mumps.

Another measure of the perceived risk factor is asking if the disease is life-threatening. As seen previously, residents are uninformed regarding Pandemic, SARS, and Monkey Pox.

Is this disease life-threatening?

N=523

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Influenza	55%	40%	5%
Bio-terrorism	84%	9%	7%
Pandemic	56%	15%	<u>29%</u>
Anthrax	74%	18%	8%
Small Pox	45%	44%	11%
SARS	48%	21%	<u>31%</u>
Tuberculosis	53%	39%	8%
Measles	23%	69%	8%
Mumps	16%	76%	8%
Monkey pox	21%	18%	<u>61%</u>

Respondents in the quantitative portion of the research were asked to measure the effect of various words as they relate to taking action. Two different scenarios were used, one where the words were used in a non-life threatening situation and one where it was used in a life-threatening situation.

The highly motivating actions words include contagious, life-threatening, and mandatory. Ones that lack the punch to cause action are serious and preventable.

Action words: Non life-threatening diseases

N=523

	Definitely Definitely Would	Probably Would	Neutral	Probably Not	Not Not
Contagious	76%	14%	7%	2%	1%
Life threatening	73%	19%	5%	2%	1%
Mandatory	58%	24%	12%	4%	2%
You have been exposed	52%	29%	15%	3%	1%
You must act now	51%	28%	17%	3%	1%
Urgent	47%	32%	15%	3%	1%
Potential to be life threatening	45%	34%	16%	4%	2%
Stop the spreading	42%	36%	16%	4%	2%
Required	41%	40%	13%	4%	2%
Serious	26%	46%	21%	6%	1%
Preventable	23%	42%	25%	8%	2%

Action words: Life threatening diseases

	Definitely Definitely	Probably	Neutral	Probably	Not
	Would	Would		Not	Not
Contagious	82%	12%	4%	1%	1%
Life threatening	83%	11%	4%	1%	1%
Mandatory	81%	11%	6%	1%	1%
You have been exposed	71%	18%	9%	1%	1%
You must act now	68%	19%	10%	2%	1%
Urgent	65%	23%	10%	1%	1%
Potential to be life threatening	63%	25%	10%	1%	1%
Stop the spreading	60%	27%	11%	1%	1%
Required	69%	21%	7%	2%	1%
Serious	56%	30%	12%	1%	1%
Preventable	53%	29%	15%	2%	1%

Summary: Action words

	Non life Threatening	Life Threatening
Contagious	76%	82%
Life threatening	73%	83%
Mandatory	58%	81%
You have been exposed	52%	71%
You must act now	51%	68%
Urgent	47%	65%
Potential to be life threatening	45%	63%
Stop the spreading	42%	60%
Required	41%	69%
Serious	26%	56%
Preventable	23%	53%

To further test the various words, we asked respondents in the focus groups to respond to the following statement as it relates to them taking action.

"The weather forecast is for extremely dangerous heat indexes this weekend. Polk County Health Department recommends all afternoon activities be canceled. Will you cancel your family picnic?"

A few respondents in each group said the statement would cause them to cancel their evening plans. However, most of the respondents would continue with their evening plans. The most common reason was the perception that with the right precautions, they would be unaffected by the heat. They also commented on the need for more specifics, such as the exact temperature and the temperature with heat index. The same could be applied to this statement – what is the expected temperature and what will it feel like. They also picked up on the word “recommended”. That signaled an option to change or not change their plans for the evening. Focus group comments included the following:

"I would because of my health, it's an individual thing."

"Everyone would think about it."

"It's too broad a statement."

Lacks specificity, too general

"If John McLaughlin said it, I would listen to him." (Because he is the expert on the weather.)

"I would take extra precautions... it would be in the back of my mind."

"No change in my plans."

"They didn't tell you what the temperature was going to be, they didn't tell you what the heat index is going to be... any of that. They didn't give you the real facts"

Lacks specific warnings, precautions

"I'd still go out... that doesn't stop me."

"I might postpone it. "

"It depends on how we felt about how hot it is."

"They don't know how I handle the heat, or how anybody else handles the heat."

"If I was a coach of a little league team or a soccer team, then I would look at it...and postpone it."

“It might remind people.”

“Depends on how old your children are... a 14 year old child can tell when they are feeling the effects of heat rather than a 5 year old child.”

“Adults don’t always think about the effects on their children...it might make them think about it.”

Communication Medium

There is no single best communication media to use during a major health outbreak. For every one person who reads the paper, someone else doesn't. The same applies for watching the local news or listening to local radio station. It will take an organized communication effort via all avenues when necessary. The exception to all communication methods judged acceptable by the focus groups was a telephone call back system. Residents, from the focus groups, do not want to be bothered by a call, most electing to send the call to voice mail or screen the call through their caller ID.

Methods of communication

N=523

	Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Not at all Likely	Don't Know
Local news network (Ch. 5, 8, or 13)	66%	29%	3%	2%
National news outlet	51%	38%	9%	2%
E-mail	18%	44%	35%	3%

Comments on these issues from the focus groups include the following:

What do you like and dislike about the following forms of communication that the Polk County Health Department might use during outbreaks of serious diseases?

- On the media (TV, Radio, Newspaper)

“Every week it’s don’t eat this, take this new medication... you tune it out.”

“I listen to the radio more than anything else... NPR.”

“I don’t have time to read the paper.”

"People have to hear something 7 times before they even hear it... communicate to people in 7 different ways for all of them to hear it." "I don't believe half of what they print."

"I don't watch TV, I hardly read the newspaper, I do it all online."

"Mail... there is a timeliness issue, potential cost issue."

"They would have to do it so many different ways, they would have to put it on the news, they would have to print it in the newspaper...they would have to have it available to me and to you."

"I wouldn't... not unless it affects me...a family member, or someone in my neighborhood."

"I like it...to see a letter in there, at least notifying us...and they give you the symptoms, at least you know."

Polk County should utilize any and all ways to contact people (except mail).

Note sent home from school

"If the school sends a message home, I pay attention."

"This is in my child's classroom."

"With my kids it's really not credible because I'll see it maybe a week later...I'd rather receive it in another form."

- Personal e-mail alert

"I don't believe anything in an e-mail."

"Depends on who it's from."

"I don't own a computer"

"I would need to know who is sending it"

"I get e-mail updates from the news stations... because I don't watch the news or read the newspaper... that's the only way I get notified of anything."

- Automated phone call system

"That's the quickest way to get a hang-up I can think of."

"I hate them, I'm not going to pay any attention to them."

"I wouldn't mind that... I always answer my phone... a good way to reach me."

"When I hear an automated message I hang up right away."

"That's the easiest [communication method] to ignore."

“Just annoying.”

“If it was a real crisis emergency... fine, but if it was ‘go get a flu shot’ I’d be annoyed.”

“I hate when my phone rings.”

“I have caller ID... when I don’t know the number I don’t pick it up.”

The Communicator

Among focus groups participants, there was a general distrust of local doctors as a communicator during a health crisis. Furthermore, that is the exact finding from the quantitative portion of the research – residents don’t want to hear about health issues from a doctor. Residents trust their physician, but believe doctors, in general, have their own take on every disease. Therefore, the ideal communicator needs to be professional, trusted and local figure. Respondents had the most favorable opinions toward the Polk County Health Department for this task both in the focus groups and from the survey.

Credibility of various sources

N=523

	Very Credible	Somewhat Credible	Not at all Credible	Don’t Know
Polk County Health Dept.	80%	17%	1%	2%
Iowa public health official	75%	23%	1%	1%
Polk County public health official	74%	24%	2%	1%
Federal public health official	69%	29%	2%	1%
Elected official	33%	49%	16%	3%
Well known doctor	31%	51%	14%	4%

Comments on these issues from the focus groups include the following:

Who would be the best spokesperson regarding health issues during outbreaks of serious diseases

“Personal doctor

Medical institutions, hospitals

"A public figure

"Probably the director of the health department."

"Whoever has charisma, presence, good communicator

"You can probably find a doctor in Des Moines who will say about anything."

"How many doctors can you get to agree on anything?"

"Someone from the Polk county health department has a public interest and is accountable for the public."

"I want the right person, not some figure PR person representing the organization. I want the right person who can communicate clearly and effectively."

"Lays it on the line... says this is what needs to be done- simple as that."

"Probably my doctor...no, not your doctor."

"I'd as my doctor... you trust your own doctor."

"A TV public service announcement... someone from the center of disease control with some credibility."

"On the national news... If it's someone in New York or California... it doesn't affect me, they're a world away."

"Doctors all have their own opinions."

"Is it a huge outbreak that's affecting thousands of people, that the media is going to be going in a frenzy on... you're not going to have a doctor... you're going to have public officials... we're going to be following up with our doctor for our personal information."

"Center for Disease Control... one localized source that knows what's going on."

"One centralized person giving the same information... that has the bottom line."

"Someone from the health department, I would consider them almost more credible, I think they're more disinterested than a doctor telling you to get a vaccination, they're accountable for the public."

"That's their (public health department) job... school superintendant's job is to be an educator."

"If the mayor came out... I wouldn't believe him. Nope. I'd still want the Polk county health officials."

"Hear it from the horse's mouth, not secondhand... you get all these kinds of rumors going around."