

Tips for communicators

Know your audience to pick the best strategy

Building a base of information about potential environmental causes of breast cancer is only part of the path toward a reduction of the disease. Individuals have to act on those findings. At the 2005 conference on Emerging Topics in Breast Cancer and the Environment Research, two members of Michigan State University's Department of Communication provided an overview of strategies that could be used to educate target audiences about the possible association between a proper diet in girls and a lower, future, breast-cancer risk, and to influence girls to eat better.

"You can aim messages directly at the girl, or indirectly at the mother or father, who then relays the content and influences the girl," said Charles Atkin, Ph.D. Another option is to level messages at policy-makers, who determine the food opportunities for communities or societies as a whole. The methods to reach each of these target audiences vary, he said.

For girls and their parents, messages about girls' diets may be best-couched in relationship to outcomes other than health, Dr. Atkin said. "We find factors like the promise of better athletic performance, greater attractiveness and the impact on self esteem can be used to motivate girls to comply with the (dietary) recommendations, or to influence the parents to guide their children to healthier food choices."

Health-associated messages do, however, have their place. The connection between a child's diet and a possibly higher incidence of breast cancer 30, 40 or 50 years down the line is a tough sell to an adolescent, but could have an impact on parents, he said. These messages are most effective if also connected with more immediate implications, such as the link between obesity and diabetes.

Decreasing high-fat, low-nutrient foods, and increasing organic and other foods that confer cancer protection are important messages, but communicators should also remember to provide information about healthy food preparation, added co-speaker Maria Lapinski, Ph.D. This is especially important for target audiences who have only recently moved to this country, she said. "People who are new immigrants to the United States face a lot of stress and a lot of concerns around health and diet. One of these things, in particular, is the type of foods to which they have access and their ability to prepare them in a healthy fashion."

Another factor that may play into the choice of a communication strategy is the role of society on food-consumption habits, she said. "Food consumption in our culture is a very social event in many cases, and we know that our relationship with our social groups drives our eating patterns in a lot of cases." For example, she said, a person may feel embarrassment about poor food choices when he or she is around others. "We also know that people who are part of particular cultural groups living in the United States — in particular Hispanics and African Americans — tend to be more collective in their orientation, so the group force is even more powerful." Communicators should consider how to use these influences in their persuasive messages, she said.

Dr. Atkin outlined some of the best ways to reach girls and their mothers. For girls, television and the internet are good communication avenues. "TV spots have a lot of potential if you can get them on the air, and the networks and local stations are sometimes cooperative. because this is not a highly controversial type of subject." Another option is to approach entertainment programmers about inserting educational

information into the scripts of movies and TV shows, he said. "Games and internet sites also work well for girls, as do printed materials, whether they are posters, comic books and even things are to them via direct mail."

Feature articles in magazines, newspapers, other printed materials, and the internet are effective tools for reaching mothers, he said. According to MSU studies, women respond to information from major cancer organizations, medical centers, foundations and universities. However, he state