The Colorado Health Foundation™

Advocacy Through Storytelling: The Power of Effective Persuasive Messaging

Stories are uniquely powerful ways we express ourselves, our values and our beliefs. Stories tend to be predictable – they have a beginning, middle and end. Stories feature relatable characters that help to build empathy and compassion for people and experiences that may vary from our own but connect with our core values. Ultimately, we tell stories to evoke emotions because we are trying to change hearts and minds in support of health equity.

When using storytelling for advocacy, our stories are undergirded by what we choose to say and how we choose to say it. The “what” and the “how” are our messages. The effectiveness of our messages depends on how well we know our audience.

Believe it or not, you are already skilled in storytelling to different audiences. Think about it, how you talk to your co-workers is different than how you talk to your family members, which is different from how you talk to your neighbors, which is different than how you would talk to an elected-official and so on.

What makes persuasive messaging different than your typical storytelling is that it begins with deep and comprehensive research on how people understand specific issues. Then, more inclusive messages are developed that help us communicate effectively with our audiences and drive positive change.

Not all people will be influenced by persuasive messaging, and we want to be realistic about how people move across spectrums of support. Typically, our main audiences are folks who are “moveable.” Not our solid supporters and not our rigid opposers—these folks are anchored in their beliefs. For example, imagine a scale from one to ten, with one being absolutely oppose, five being neutral, and ten being absolutely support. Moving someone from two to a ten is nearly impossible. However, moving someone from a two to a five is an achievable goal. This could look like influencing someone who may silently oppose a health equity issue to move to a more conflicted neutral stance. Or maybe we want to influence someone to move from being a silent supporter to being a more vocal supporter.

By understanding people’s mindsets or their attitudes and beliefs on a specific health equity issue, you can create powerful messages that resonate with Coloradans. How do we know these messages resonate with Coloradans? Part of the research process is testing different messages with different groups of people to really understand what messages effectively shift mindsets so that we can build wider public support for policies that create a healthier Colorado for everyone.

Persuasive messaging is just one tool in our advocacy toolbox. It’s research informed and highly customizable. However, that means it’s also resource intensive. And let’s name and acknowledge that persuasive messaging can sometimes feel “icky” because you’re trying to influence someone about something you know is morally right or morally wrong – and that’s a hard space to be in. So persuasive messaging is not going to be the best advocacy tool for everyone.

How do you know if persuasive messaging is the right tool for your advocacy? First and foremost, based on your audience honestly ask yourself the following questions

1. Is it safe for me to do so?
2. Do I consent to sharing my story in this way?
3. Is this audience worthy of my story?
4. Can I meet this audience where THEY are now (not where I want them to be in the future)?
5. Can you engage this audience with compassion?

From there, YOU decide when and how you want to engage.

To recap, persuasive messaging is research-informed communications that contain information intended to shift an audience's attitudes, beliefs and behaviors around particular issues. We use it to influence or make an ask of decision-makers, build and mobilize support among people who are moveable on a specific issue, or to plant seeds for future discussions.

Learn More About The Colorado Health Foundation's Messaging Work

In 2024, CHF released the research-backed Good Neighbor Messaging Guide, based on deep multi-year audience research conducted in Colorado, on how to deploy effective persuasive messaging about affordable housing policies that can activate supporters, move those who are conflicted or concerned, and neutralize opposition messages. The full guide is available in English and Spanish on our website.

CHF is hosting a two-part virtual training series for Colorado housing advocates who are working to grow their supporter base through persuasive messaging, in order to build their capacity to use this evidence-based messaging guidance. The training will include hands-on exercises that allow participants to practically apply research findings and recommendations to their current work and context.

October Virtual Training Series:

- Part 1: October 2, 2025, 1-3 p.m.
- Part 2: October 9, 2025, 1-3 p.m.

November Virtual Training Series:

- Part 1: November 13, 2025, 1-3 p.m.
- Part 2: November 20, 2025, 1-3 p.m.

To allow for community-building and the best learning experience for participants, training spots are limited, so **please register early**!

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