

Ed Comeau: Hi, my name is Ed Comeau from CRR Radio, which is a production of Vision 2020. We're continuing our series focusing on the COVID 19 pandemic, and on today's show, we're talking about how you can make your messaging have more impact during this health crisis by using behavioral science. We'll be talking to two experts in the field, so let's get into the show.

Ed Comeau: And today is Wednesday, April 22nd, and joining us on CRR Radio is Dr. Ellie Kazemi, who's a professor of behavioral science at California State University, Northridge. And Ellie, I really appreciate you taking the time to join us.

Ellie Kazemi: Thank you so much, Ed, I look forward to it. I love the messaging you put out, so I'm glad to be here.

Ed Comeau: Well thank you, I appreciate it. Ellie and I have worked on a number of projects over the past few years, primarily with the [inaudible 00:00:53] Foundation, looking at incorporating behavioral science into messaging. And that's how I got to know Ellie and the work that she does. And I wanted to have Ellie on today to take a look at how we can incorporate behavioral science into the messaging that people are trying to do around the pandemic. I mean, we're seeing a lot of attempts, a lot of efforts at putting messaging out there, some is working, some is not working. And so, I think I'd like to start with maybe just a little basic primer if you can, Ellie, on what is behavioral science?

Ellie Kazemi: Well, it's simply a study of behavior. Why do we do what we do and what are some of the things that change what we do? It is something I think most of us feel intimate with. We all behave, but study of behavior is more focused on what are some of the things that change behavior and what explains why some people behave the way that they do.

Ed Comeau: And I think in the past, and I know certainly from my experience in fire safety, we've oftentimes put out messages and just said, "Okay, we've kind of checked that box," we put that message out there, and we walk away without really knowing whether behavior was changed or not, which is the ultimate goal. We do want to change people's behavior. We don't want to just put a message out there and say, "Okay, we're done." So what are some of the things that can be done to try to communicate a message in a way that will result in behavioral change?

Ellie Kazemi: It is an excellent question. Well, I think part of that depends on the resources that you have. Most of the time when we're messaging, we are limited to the funds we have and the sources we have. If we had money to do it all, I think that it would be different.

I think that effective messaging has some key components, one is that it is catchy enough that people remember it. I think most of the messaging we put out includes that. Politicians do a really good job of that, coming up with catchy phrases. That's something that I think a lot of people recognize.

The other parts of messaging I think that's really important is to provide information that's more immediate rather than something that potentially will give people cumulative or longterm gain. And I think that a lot of our messages don't do a good job of that. It's harder to bring potential consequences closer to people or give them contact with it. That's true when we're telling people to not do certain things with fire safety because they might not have had the experience in the past or been close to someone who's lost their home in the past, and it's true when it comes to other things like brushing our teeth. It's difficult to bring consequences close, but that's a huge part of making a message effective.

The other components I think that more recently I've been hearing social scientists talk a lot about actually, and hasn't done a good job of publicizing this, is that effective messaging is positive in nature. It doesn't make people feel bad, mostly because people really disregard information that makes them feel bad. So good messaging targets some of these key components.

Ed Comeau: So I mean, for example, it's better to say, "Do this," versus, "Don't do this." Is that what you're saying?

Ellie Kazemi: Yes. Well there, I think you're referring to something that, as behavioral scientists, we call it the dead man rule. We say if a dead man can do it, then it's not really behavior. If we say, "Don't talk," well, a dead man cannot talk, so that's not going to really help someone put things into action. And the general advice is to move toward things that give people action terms.

Ed Comeau: Did you say the dead man rule? I had never heard of that one yet.

Ellie Kazemi: Yeah, we call it the dead man rule, meaning if it dead can do it, it's not behavior.

Ed Comeau: Well, I would say that's an easy way to remember it too. So you're kind of applying behavioral science there as a little catchy catch phrase there to make it stick, aren't you?

Ellie Kazemi: Yeah, absolutely.

Ed Comeau: Let's focus a little bit on the pandemic. We've seen a lot of messaging going out from a whole bunch of different agencies, both at national level, local, state, things like that. Do you have any examples of what you would call very effective messaging versus less effective messaging, and perhaps some of the consequences that have resulted either way, good or bad?

Ellie Kazemi: Absolutely. I think that a lot of the messaging that is being put out, particularly with COVID-19 has resulted in confusion for the public. Sadly, I think it's difficult for people to put forth a lot of effort, so do things like wash your hands, purchase masks and wear masks, stay home and away from loved ones and family and activities, when the outcomes of those things are not very clear.

And I think that one of the major problems that we have currently with some of the messaging is that we hear mixed messages. At the very beginning of COVID, we were told that it is most likely to affect individuals who are immune-compromised, like the elderly. The problem with that is that young people then immediately did not feel like this could affect them because the messaging did not then clearly delineate or explain how it very well could affect them even if only the elderly were affected.

And we have also had all sorts of information about the masks. "There's no need to wear a mask if you do not have a COVID. The only individuals who need to wear it are people who have it." And then later on we're told, "No, this seems to be airborne. It might be best if everybody wears a mask."

And I think that the job of leadership is to try to provide uniform information. When that uniformity is lost, when it's no longer clear, as people, we do the next best thing, which is to stop looking at our leadership. We stop trusting the information being given to us and we fall back to the thing we call our gut feelings, or logic, or what we intuitively think can happen, which really means we rely on our past experiences.

And in a case like COVID, we don't exactly have past experiences that match it. So people I think in some ways begin to listen to folklore and any information that families or friends may be posting because they're just looking for trusted sources. So I trust my mom more than I trust the leadership at this point. She cares for me because the leadership has lied to me, or has not been transparent, or has given me mixed messages.

So I think that in these ways, we've been very ineffective in the way we're getting messages to people. I think the best example of how important that is in washing of the hands. The one thing that's been consistent is, "Wash your hands. Wash your hands. Wash your hands for 20 seconds, wash your hands when you get home, wash your hands when you touch things," and they have pretty effective in giving that message.

The next thing is how do we change people's behaviors because washing hands is effortful and you have to remember it, you have to find an immediate source for washing your hands, people can forget it if it's not a part of their regular habits. We know it's difficult because we've had data that show us that even medical staff who are trained too and shown all the consequences of not washing their hands often enough, even they don't adhere to those rules and don't wash their hands often enough unless we intervene and add other sources to maintain that behavior. So I think that the messaging now is effective, we just now need to put forth other things for washing hands that would maintain it.

So I think that if I were to give some good and bad examples, those would be it. The bad examples are all the information that's making individuals distrust information. They can find holes in any of the things that are offered. And as soon as people can poke holes because things have not been transparent or

there's been mixed messages, especially when you're asking people to put forth a lot of effort, you're likely to see people actually not engage in the behavior.

Ed Comeau:

So I mean, is this the sort of thing that has led to, probably one of the most infamous things out of the pandemic, is a run on toilet paper? People don't know what's going on. They're getting a lack of information. And I know that from fire safety, we've learned that panic is really a myth in that people don't panic. What they're doing is they're reacting as best they feel they should based on the limited information that they have. So is that kind of an example of that here? That they've limited information, they want to get control of the situation in some way, shape or form, and one of the things they can do is go buy a lot of toilet paper. Is that kind of an example of what you're talking about?

Ellie Kazemi:

I love it. First, I love what you're saying about how it is best to give individuals the benefit of the doubt. I mean, I see on social media posts, people getting super angry with young folks that are on the beach or partying, and it's, I think, difficult because it's easy to blame, not that we want to go around and blame people, but it's better to give people of the benefit of the doubt and presume that every single one of us wants to be good. You know, none of us want to lie, none of us want to be doing things that harm other people, we are just victims of the circumstances and the information we have. The experiences we've had brings us to the decisions we make. And I think that for the most part, most of us are trying to do the best that we can under the circumstance, exactly like you said.

With the toilet paper issue, I think part of that is, yes, I'd like to know what to do during this time. This is going to be a crisis and I need some perception about how to behave under this crisis. Again, this is where leadership could be super important because if you give me some things do that I can do, I'm likely to engage in them, and that information was not given to us.

But I think that the toilet paper thing is actually a beautiful example of how our behavior can be changed so much by the behavior of others around us. We tend to change behaviors as people around us do. You know, this has been shown in social science research when people will cross the crosswalk on a red if they see someone else do it. So if we see other people do something, we're more likely to do it. And in the cases of toilet paper, I think that's exactly what happened. Some people just started buying toilet paper for whatever reason and I think a lot of people were just freaking out about the fact that there are no toilet papers. So now toilet paper became a commodity to purchase. Perhaps they don't even know why, but they were purchasing it because they knew it might run out.

Ed Comeau:

Well, we've been talking with Dr. Ellie Kazemi, who's a professor of behavioral science at California State University, Northridge, about a different aspect of the pandemic that we're looking at, and that's behavioral science, how you can apply it to your messaging, because the end result that we want is people to change their behaviors. We don't want to just be putting messaging out there.

And Ellie, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today on CRR Radio.

Ellie Kazemi: Thank you so much for having me. Stay safe.

Ed Comeau: Today's podcast is supported by [inspectionreportsonline.net](http://inspectionreportsonline.net) and they have an important message for the CRR community. After listening to and working with many AHJs during the current situation, IROL is offering the use of their inspection, testing, and maintenance compliance and reviews program and their fire and life safety risk assessment programs at no cost for 90 days. During these difficult times, collaborating and engaging with local businesses and service providers couldn't be more important and going to have a profound impact on fire and life safety within the community.

As the health crisis affects the way everybody does business, it also provides an opportunity to explore new options to perform essential business functions for your department. You can contact IROL at [info@irol-llc.net](mailto:info@irol-llc.net), or call (331) 454-7800 to learn more and get your community using these proven CRR tools. They've done the planning so you can take action. Again, you can contact IROL at [info@irol-llc.net](mailto:info@irol-llc.net), or (331) 454-7800, or go to [inspectionreportsonline.net](http://inspectionreportsonline.net).

Ed Comeau: And it's Thursday, April 23rd, and joining us today on CRR Radio is Maggie Lawrence, who's a behavior change marketer with Marketing for Change, an agency that focuses on behavioral change. And Marketing for Changes is a agency that we at Vision 2020 have worked on a number of projects with. And Maggie, I really appreciate you taking the time to join us today.

Maggie Lawrence: Thanks. I'm happy to be here.

Ed Comeau: The reason I asked Maggie to be on is Marketing for Change was recently behind the formation of a working group focusing on behavior change and messaging during the pandemic. And I was wondering if maybe you could fill us in a little bit on what that's all about?

Maggie Lawrence: Absolutely. So this month, we formed the Pandemic Behavioral Working Group with iHeartMedia and IPREX, which is a network of about 70 communications agencies in 26 countries, with the intention of providing evidence-based guidance for public health communications and policies during the COVID-19 outbreak. So the idea is to champion effective approaches in motivating citizens to consistently practice behaviors that can slow the spread of pandemic disease.

And so, those approaches are rooted in behavioral science. We know at Marketing for Change and within the behavior change community, from decades of research, that simply telling people what to do isn't enough to change behavior, and that's especially in a confused and rapidly changing environment. We also recognize that behaviors will shift through the stages of the pandemic. And we're already seeing that top-down messaging isn't effective

for everyone and you can't have a one size fits all message or campaign that's going to be effective longterm.

Ed Comeau: So as a result of what's going on worldwide in the pandemic, are you seeing specific examples, either good or bad, that really inspired you to form this working group and say, "We need to address this issue and help people as much as we can in getting the messaging out."

Maggie Lawrence: Absolutely. So in working with IPREX, which is a global communications network, like I said, we were seeing early on that some strategies were not working. And so once this hit the US, we were motivated to take a more proactive approach. So we know that top-down crisis messaging only works in the short term. So seeing that this pandemic is likely to kind of go the longterm for us, we need sustained change and we can't just rely on risk communication to make that happen.

So it's understandable that leaders need to give blanket statements like, "Stay at home," but as weeks and months go by, we're also going to need segmented messaging that effectively engages people's different motivations.

So an example would be a difference in understanding what matters most to churchgoers has led to us seeing that some congregations are safely worshiping from home and others are attempting to gather in large crowds still. You saw that early on in March and early April, and then you saw that on Easter, where some sheriffs were having to break up church gatherings. And it's all about how that's being messaged to the congregation of whether they see the value in staying home because it protects their congregation, their community, their first responders, which of course is relevant to you guys, and we can see that that can be effective messaging.

Ed Comeau: In a situation like this where the pandemic is an invisible disease that's around us, it's not something tangible like a hurricane or a weather disaster or something like that, do you think that also feeds into it where people feel like it's an invisible threat that they can't do anything about that? They can't shore up their house against a blizzard or something like that. Is that leading to this whole issue of what do I do, what can I do, and people are unsure about at all?

Maggie Lawrence: Absolutely. So that goes back to risk messaging typically not being effective unless that risk is imminent, right in front of you and personally affects you. And so, as they call it an invisible enemy, coronavirus and COVID-19, it's very difficult in a lot of cases to make that seem like someone knocking on your door and trying to invade your house, or a hurricane coming through the gulf and about to hit your coastal community.

So like you said, it feels like something that is distant, far away, and may not personally affect you, especially if you're in a rural area or a community that just hasn't been hit by the pandemic yet. That's why you need other types of, really,

we call them behavioral determinants. We're appealing to other types of motivators for people than risk. So things like norms. Norms are really important because we don't like to stand out, we don't like to be the odd man out, and so we do what other people are doing.

And so, where you've seen what government has been calling social distancing and behavioral marketers from early on recognized that it needed to be called physical distancing to clarify what that meant, not that we can't be close socially, it's actually a really important thing to pursue during this time where we're isolating at home, not in our normal social networks, is to recognize that truly that's just a physical distance. You can be close to people and that's what people need right now is support. It's kind of taking it away from the danger risk messaging, which typically isn't effective longterm, like I said, and changing it into these are the norms and this is the new normal, which a lot of people have been saying, so that people can start to adjust their day-to-day lives and see this as something that isn't just in the immediate and it's going to require some adaptation on their part.

Ed Comeau: So I want to get information out. I want to get people in my community to observe social distancing, constant handwashing, all the other things that we're being told to do. What are some of the tips you might have on how to craft a message that will work and resonate?

Maggie Lawrence: Absolutely. So within behavior change, there are a number of behavioral determinants, like I said, that we use a regular basis, and we tend to kind of group those into fun, easy and popular. And so the idea is that we need to make behaviors that we're seeking people to perform fun. So there's great examples of new efforts around the world with dance challenges and fun songs and humor, you see that all over the internet, of how to make isolating at home and wearing a mask and washing your hands all the time for at least 20 seconds, and all of these things a little more fun.

We also say that we need to invest in making behaviors easier. So from getting food and supplies or working from home, or kind of setting up a gym in your house, doing things from home need to be made easier. So we can share a lot of examples of how people can do that, and then making things popular goes back to those norms. So are other people doing it? Does it align with your own self standards, things that you expect of yourself and the type of person that you want to be?

We also know that there are some other determinants that are really important during an outbreak. One of those is just prompts or reminders, so letting people know that they need to engage in this behavior at a certain time. So it's a trigger. When you go out of your house, put on a mask, but you don't need to wear one inside. Simple things like that. We also can create hand-washing cues for people at work and in their everyday routines, which will be really important once we're kind of out of this quarantine phase.

And then changing our environments is going to be really important since we have to act differently in different places during an outbreak. So really good example is how you'll see stores using tape on the floors to make sure that people are standing at least six feet apart.

Ed Comeau: So the Behavioral Working Group that you're forming, is it going to have tips, suggestions? Is there a place that people can go to get more information and more help in all out of this?

Maggie Lawrence: Yeah, we don't have a resource center right now, but eventually we should have kind of a list of those go-to behaviors. So we're compiling kind of a repository of relevant behavioral research, including research from past pandemics and a list of current scientific behavior trends research that is relevant to this.

We're also working on developing a set of specific segmented behaviors for key audiences that are affected by the pandemic. So that way, it will allow agencies like you know, governments, corporations, nonprofits and others in the public health field to better segment what they're saying to whom and make sure that we're using shared definitions of key terms to reduce confusion. And really, if there's confusion around what we should be doing, social distancing being a great example early on, I think we've used that enough by now that people know what it means, but initially, it was confusing to people so it was very difficult for them to follow that guidance.

Ed Comeau: Well we've been talking with Maggie Lawrence, who's a behavior change marketer with Marketing for Change, about some of the behavioral aspects of the pandemic we're going through and the working group that they've been a part of forming. And Maggie, we'll certainly include more information in the show notes and I appreciate taking the time to talk with us today.

Maggie Lawrence: Absolutely.

Ed Comeau: You have been listening to a special edition of CRR Radio, focusing on what departments across the country are doing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I also want to remind you, the Coronavirus Shared Resources Library, that contains a wealth of information relating to policies and procedures that you might find helpful. Or, if you have something you want to contribute, you can do it all that [strategicfire.org/coronavirus](http://strategicfire.org/coronavirus).

Ed Comeau: CRR Radio is a production of Vision 2020 and it's produced by me, Ed Comeau, and edited by Rich Palmer. Be sure to subscribe and follow us on Twitter and Facebook @StrategicFire. Thank you for listening.