



Use the right language

One of the potential pitfalls in any communication is assuming the person you're speaking to – or writing for – uses the same language as you do. If words and phrases resonate with the target audience (as well as being easily understood), they're more likely to respond to it in a way that produces results, even if this is ultimately enabling them to make a choice not to take action.

- You want to come across as a provider of credible information, so aim to get the right balance between being authoritative and understanding your audience, how they think, what's important to them and how they express themselves.
- Don't make assumptions about what's acceptable or in common usage among your target group. Get it wrong and it can sound fake and even patronising and alienating.
- Look at your own prejudices or preferences, and recognise any gaps in awareness about how other people express themselves in their daily lives.
- Do some research to work out how to word information so it really makes sense and is relevant to your readership. This may be listening to focus groups or assessing the content of websites of organisations that know your target audience.
- How the media generally (online and in print) get across clinical information is a good indicator of levels of public understanding.
- Don't shy away from terms in public use that are less acceptable to healthcare specialists – most women instantly know what a 'smear test' is, for instance, even if the professional (or policy) preference is for 'cervical' – use both and make it clear they mean the same thing.
- Drill down into your target group and see if there is any segmentation that you need to consider and sub-groups that may require a slightly different style or tone.
- Differentiate between jargon (including 'management speak') and relevant terminology. Is a word or phrase necessary in the context of the information? Can it be easily explained? Does the reader need to know and understand a specialist term? For instance, will becoming familiar with a clinical expression help them talk to healthcare professionals and be more involved in decisions about their treatment?
- A positive tone can motivate and reassure readers, but temper this with realism and don't gloss over less palatable facts. People want believable information, which answers their questions and puts them in a stronger position to make their own choices.