

This unit describes the steps involved in message development. It notes how initial messages that need to be rapidly disseminated at the onset of an emergency should evolve and be incorporated into the broader SBCC strategy to address specific communication objectives for intended audiences.

This unit brings together key elements from all previous units to ensure that messages are evidence-based and respond to relevant needs in contextually appropriate ways. The unit provides a range of tools, tips and recommendations for effective message design, and particular emphasis has been placed on pretesting.

Having completed this unit, you will have the following tools to assist in putting together your SBCC strategy for the emergency response:

- [Worksheet 8.1: Developing Message Maps](#)
- [Worksheet 8.2: Key Messages per Audience Segment in the SBCC Strategy](#)
- [Worksheet 8.3: Checklist for Reviewing Communication Materials Against the 7Cs of Communication](#)
- [Sample Template Message Map for Cholera](#)
- [Seven Steps to Developing Message Maps](#)

What Is Message Development?

Message development involves putting together the information that needs to be conveyed to the general public and to the intended audiences during an emergency. Messages are likely to change as the emergency evolves, with different phases of the emergency requiring a different focus. Messages can have a variety of purposes depending on the communication objective and on the audiences being targeted:

- Educate about the risks, how to assess risk and how to manage risk
- Inform about risk-reduction behaviors
- Promote risk-reduction behaviors and practices
- Increase the trust between the public and authorities or service providers
- Reduce and dispel rumors Reduce fear and stigma
- Nurture advocacy
- Promote social cohesion
- Resolve conflicts and controversies

Well-designed messages are specific to the audiences and should clearly describe both the desired behavior and the benefits that can be reaped by engaging in it.

Why Is Message Development Important?

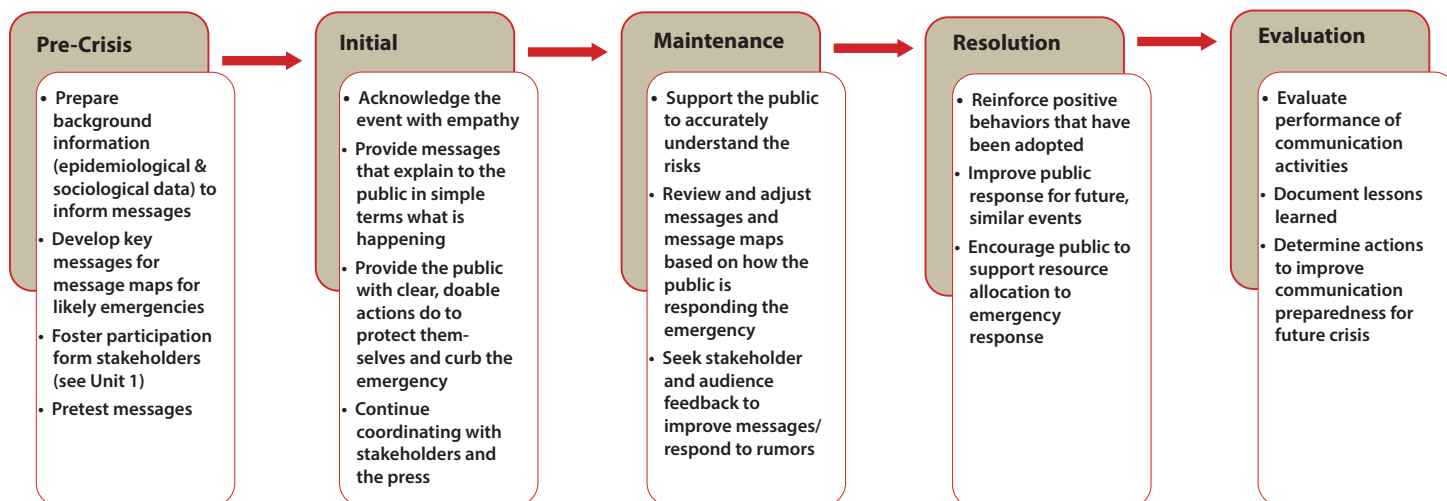
Messages are key in providing consistency to the communication response. This is particularly important during an emergency, when fear and anxiety can breed rumors and affect the ways in which people respond. Developing key messages allows multiple partners to speak with one voice, in a clear and concise way. As the same, consistent messages are disseminated across all channels of communication in a harmonized manner, they reinforce each other and increase the effectiveness of SBCC efforts.

Time constraints during an emergency may lead programmers and planners to develop quick, generic messages based on technical information and scientific evidence only. However, technical messages alone, even if formulated in simple, understandable language, are unlikely to be fully effective in promoting desired behaviors. Messages need to take into account the local context, traditions, culture and potential stigma associated with the emergency.

Messages, their content, the way they are formulated and the audiences they target, are likely to evolve as the emergency progresses. **In the initial phase** of an emergency, the focus needs to be on disseminating information to

the general public quickly and empathetically about simple, doable protective actions. **In the subsequent phases**, messages will likely need to be refined to reflect local perceptions associated with the emergency and the perceived consequences of performing the desired behaviors. As information about at-risk groups and behaviors that aggravate the emergency become better known, messaging would also become more tailored to address specific behaviors and target specific audiences.

Figure 8 below illustrates how messages should evolve during the phases of an emergency.



Taking into consideration that messages need to be reviewed, refined, added and even change throughout an emergency based on how it evolves, there are a series of steps that can be done before and during the crisis to support the development of effective SBCC messages.

Key Steps in Message Development

1. Review Data to Support Preparedness
2. Develop Message Maps
3. Review and Develop Messages
4. Link Messages to the SBCC Strategy
5. Link Messages to Materials
6. Pretest Messages and Materials

Review Data to Support Preparedness

Wherever possible, the pre-crisis phase should be characterized by background research of **epidemiological and social data** that can inform key messages should an emergency occur. The information can prove useful to provide reality-based communication and messages at the onset of an emergency. Examples of such information include:

- Statistics on the prevalence and geographical distribution of key household health practices (e.g., handwashing, hygiene, immunization and malnutrition)
- Traditional and cultural norms that influence behaviors and health seeking practices
- Media habits of the population across the country
- Distribution of at-risk and hard-to-reach populations

In areas prone to known emergencies (for example, cholera, measles, polio or natural disasters), such background information can be used during the pre-crisis phase to develop message maps that address the key protective behaviors for the expected emergency.

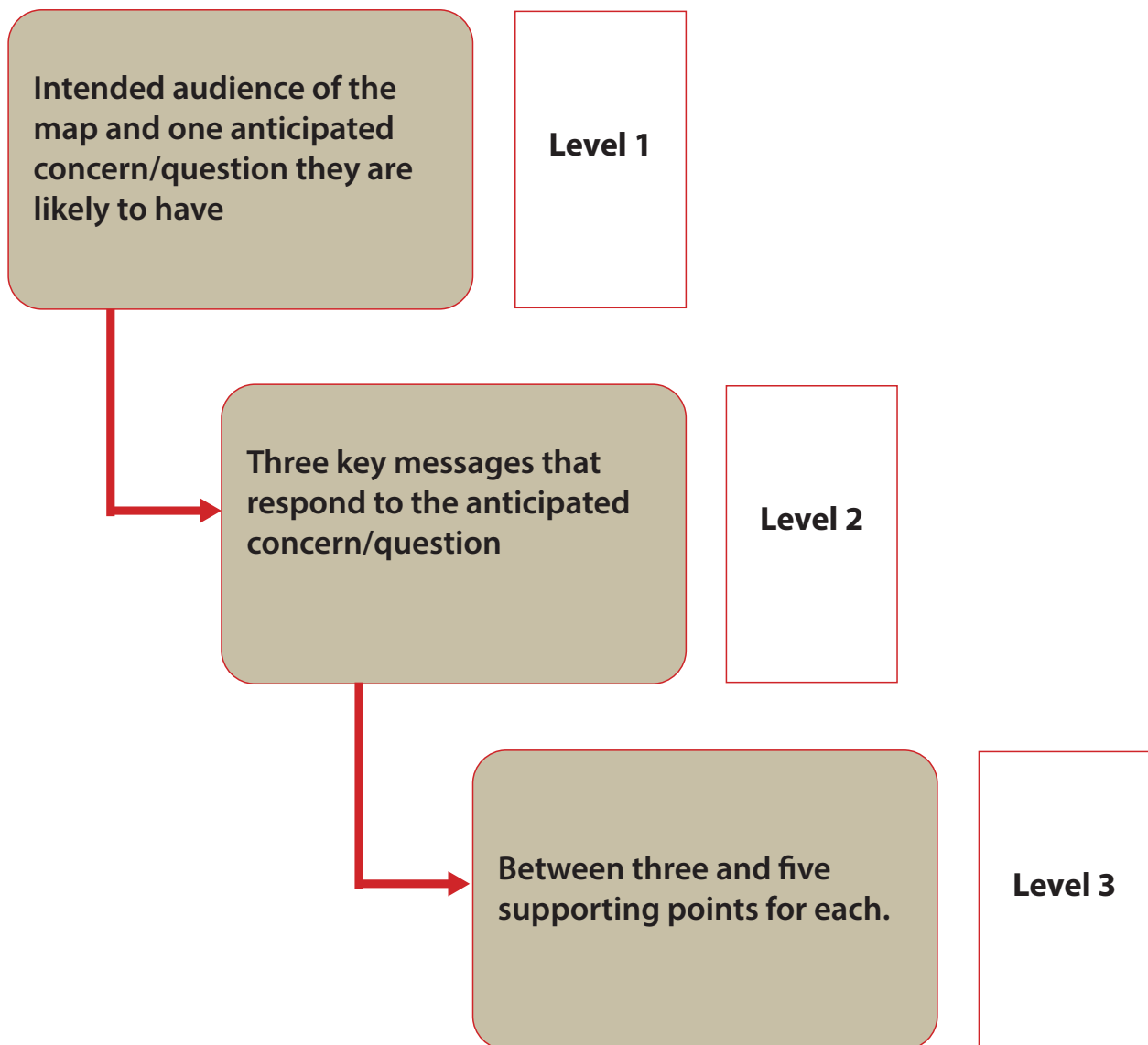
Develop Message Maps

Communication at the onset of an emergency is particularly challenging as fear and anxiety can affect the ways in which the public responds to messages, what information they retain and how they perceive it.

One method that is recognized and recommended for developing consistent messages during an emergency is the use of message maps. **Message maps** are a useful tool that provides factual information about the emergency that can be shared quickly with partners and the media to ensure that information is delivered in a consistent, clear and concise manner.

Message maps describe hierarchically organized information in three levels to anticipated or actual questions and concerns from audiences about the emergency. **Figure 9** below provides a brief description of each of the three levels of information in a message map.

Figure 9: Levels of Information In a Message Map



Audiences for message maps are generally wide-ranging and can include:

- The general public
- Individuals directly affected by the emergency
- Individuals who are indirectly affected by the emergency
- At-risk and vulnerable individuals
- Service providers (including health, emergency and law enforcement)
- Decision makers
- Authorities and government bodies
- Organizations involved in the response
- The media and the press

Each audience segment should have its own message map, with each map addressing one separate concern. **Table 13** below describes the information that makes up each level of the message map. See the **Sample Template of a Message Map for Cholera** in the Appendix.

Table 13: Information for Each Message Map Level

Audience:	<i>Insert the audience to whom this message map is addressed. It can be as broad as “the general public,” or more specific. For example, the media, decision makers or at-risk individuals. Each message map should target ONE audience only.</i>	
Concern or Question:	<i>Insert ONE anticipated concern or question that the audience is likely to have regarding the emergency. Examples include: “How is Ebola spread?”; “What is cholera?”; “What does one do to stop the outbreak?”; “What are the signs and symptoms of avian influenza?”</i>	
Key Message 1: <i>Insert one message that can help answer the selected concern/question.</i>	Key Message 2: <i>Insert a second message that can help answer the selected concern/question.</i>	Key Message 3: <i>Insert a third message that can help answer the selected concern/question.</i>
Supporting Points: <i>Write between two and five points with information that supports and clarifies the key message.</i>	Supporting Points: <i>Write between two and five points with information that supports and clarifies the key message.</i>	Supporting Points: <i>Write between two and five points with information that supports and clarifies the key message.</i>

Message maps can be developed for as many audiences as necessary, and to address as many questions/concerns as anticipated for each audience group. It is likely that, in the pre-crisis and initial phases of an emergency, message maps will mostly target the general public and the media.

In areas where known emergencies can occur, message maps should be developed during the pre-crisis phase so that they can be quickly accessed and distributed immediately at the onset of an emergency to support harmonized messaging. As the emergency evolves, message maps can be fine-tuned to respond more specifically to arising questions that populations and individuals may have.

Undoubtedly, the key messages are an essential component of message maps, and it is important that these are developed following some simple guidance. **Table 14** on the next page provides a list of Do’s and Don’ts of message development.

More on Message Maps

- [Message Mapping, Risk and Crisis Communication](#)
- [Message Map: Ebola – New Jersey’s Department of Health](#)
- [Effective Media Communication during Public Health Emergencies](#)
- [California Water Resources Control Board – Drinking Water Guidance](#)

Although message maps are typically developed following [seven recommended steps](#), the following worksheet provides some simple guidance on developing your own message maps for an emergency. It is advisable to complete this worksheet together with partners and stakeholders. When developing messages, consider indicators and communication objectives (**Unit 6**).

Table 14: Do's and Don'ts of Message Development

Do's	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide simple, doable actions that the public can perform to reduce risk. • Acknowledge the emotions (fear, anxiety and sadness) that people may be experiencing as a result of the emergency. • Keep key messages short and concise and limit the number of messages to the most important; only state relevant information that the audience needs and wants to know. • If there is uncertainty linked to the emergency and its evolution, acknowledge it. • Only provide known facts and avoid speculation. • Ensure that messages instill confidence. • Use simple language that can be understood by the intended audiences. • Develop messages taking into consideration the communication channels used to disseminate them. • Include messages for the media, and, in cases where emergencies can spread to other countries, include international media too. • Use evidence-based data to inform messages. • Link messages to available services and resources when appropriate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fuel fear and anxiety, there are likely to be already elevated. • Provide background information as this may distract audiences from the key messages. • Develop long messages addressing more than one issue at once. • Deny uncertainty if it exists, as this affects credibility. • Speculate about any issue relating to the emergency. • Provide information that is dishonest or factually incorrect. • Use technical jargon and complex words. • Blame individuals, organizations or institutions for the emergency. • Use language that can be interpreted as judgmental or discriminatory. • Offer promises that cannot be guaranteed. • Use humor.

Review and Develop Messages

Message maps are used to inform all communication relating to the emergency, and are especially useful during the initial phases. As the emergency evolves, however, communication needs to become more strategic and focused to respond to the changing needs and context. Messages, therefore, become part of a broader SBCC strategy that identifies primary and influencing audiences, communication objectives and approaches to promote behavior change.

Key to an effective SBCC strategy is positioning. **Positioning** refers to the most compelling and unique benefit that the audience can experience by engaging in the desired behaviors communicated by the key messages. Effective positioning has an emotional appeal that “hooks” audiences and presents the desired behaviors in ways that are both persuasive and appealing.

Messages therefore need to tell people clearly what benefits they can reap if they engage in the desired behaviors. The key benefit, much like the messages, is also likely to evolve throughout the course of the emergency. At the beginning, people’s motivation to perform the desired behaviors is probably going to be survival and stopping the outbreak. In the subsequent phases, the key benefit may highlight the value in rebuilding communities and avoiding future outbreaks.

Importantly, the key benefit must go beyond standard program goals, such as “having a healthy community” or “contributing to the development of your country,” as these are unlikely to “hook” the audiences. Rather, key benefits need to consider what appeals to the audience, taking into consideration immediate, personal, social and economic rewards associated with stopping and preventing future emergencies.

The key benefit should frame the whole communication strategy and needs to be promoted across all communication channels and activities. It is crucial to capture the key benefit that would best resonate with the audiences. Reviewing relevant available data, such as ethnographic, sociological or other research studies can help identify the key benefit. If such information is not available, it is worth spending some time running focus group discussions with target communities to gain an understanding of what would most appeal to them and motivate action. Some ideas of how to run rapid needs assessments and focus group discussions are provided in **Units 2 and 3**.

Important Information for Message Design

Although during an emergency it is often necessary to have messages that target the general population, messages will also need to be tailored for individual audience segments. In both cases, it is important to review the following information about the audience in relation to the emergency and the issue causing the emergency:

- What is their level of knowledge?
- What are common beliefs and attitudes?
- What are their general risk perceptions?
- What is their general level of perceived self-efficacy?
- What are the dominant social and cultural norms around behaviors and practices linked to the emergency?
- What are their emotions associated with the emergency and related behaviors?
- What are the dominant current behaviors?
- What are key barriers to the desired behaviors?
- What are key facilitators for the desired behaviors?

Link Messages to the SBCC Strategy

The **key benefit** or benefits identified through **Worksheet 8.2** in this unit should be pretested with representatives of the audience groups to ensure that they resonate with and appeal to them. The most persuasive key benefit should be selected and used to summarize the essence of the whole SBCC strategy. All communication activities will be framed around the key benefit and therefore serve as a constant reminder of the advantages that can be reaped by engaging in the desired behaviors.

Key messages are important vehicles for promoting the key benefit while conveying essential information. Effective key messages should include two essential elements:

- **A call to action:** Explain the exact desired behavior that the audience should engage in.
- **The key benefit:** State the advantages that the audience can expect to reap if they perform the desired behavior.

The rapid needs assessment, audience analysis, segmentation and profiling, and the message-mapping exercises discussed throughout this I-Kit should help identify the content for key benefit messages. Messages need to be matched to specific audiences, taking into consideration the following questions:

- What are the audience's needs, motivations and barriers to change?
- What actions does the program want the audience to take?
- Why should the audience take the desired actions?

For each audience segment, the answers to the above questions need to be matched with the communication objectives, the key benefit, supporting information and the call to action in order to create the full message.

WORKSHEET 8.1: DEVELOPING MESSAGE MAPS

Purpose: This worksheet provides some guidance to identify key areas of a message map for an expected or existing emergency.

Directions: Complete this worksheet together with stakeholders to promote a broad exchange and analysis. Wherever possible, access evidence-based data to complete this worksheet. You can refer to the completed worksheets from *Unit 2: Needs Assessment*, *Unit 4: Audience Analysis & Segmentation* and *Unit 5: Audience Profiling* as these contain helpful information for completing this worksheet.

Please note that this worksheet is followed by a completed example that you can use as reference if necessary.

Brainstorm with your team to name all possible audiences that are in some way affected by the emergency. The table below provides categories of stakeholders to prompt thinking; however, you may wish to add other categories that are specific to your context.

Category	Stakeholders/Audiences
Individuals Directly Affected:	
Individuals Indirectly Affected:	
At-Risk and Vulnerable Individuals:	
Service providers:	
Influential Individuals/Decision Makers:	
Authorities and Government Bodies:	
Organizations Involved in the Response:	
Organizations Affected by the Emergency:	
The Media:	
Other:	

WORKSHEET 8.1: DEVELOPING MESSAGE MAPS (Continued)

Purpose: This worksheet provides guidance to identify key areas of a message map for an expected or existing emergency.

Directions: To help you identify possible concerns or questions an audience may have relating to the emergency, consider the various aspects that may be impacted by the emergency or impact the way an individual responds to the emergency. For each audience, list possible concerns or questions relating to the following areas:

- Access to information
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Health
- Economics/Income Generating Activities
- Legal
- Religion
- Trust
- Safety/security
- Livestock

Audience	Concerns/Questions

- Review the questions/concerns in the table above and select the ones that you believe to be most pertinent. For each selected audience and question/concern develop:
 - Three key messages that answer that question/concern
 - Three supporting facts for each key message

Audience:		
Question:		
Key Message 1	Key Message 2	Key Message 3

Supporting Facts	Supporting Facts	Supporting Facts

WORKSHEET 8.2: KEY MESSAGES PER AUDIENCE SEGMENT IN THE SBCC STRATEGY

Purpose: This worksheet provides a template to record information that can guide and inform key messages for each audience segment that the SBCC strategy plans to target.

Directions: Refer to the worksheets completed in *Unit 2: Rapid Needs Assessment*, *Unit 4: Audience Analysis & Segmentation*, *Unit 5: Audience Profiling* and *Unit 6: Developing Communication Objectives & Indicators*. These contain useful information for this exercise and will ensure that messages are evidence-based.

Complete the table below with relevant information for each audience segment.

Please note that this worksheet is followed by a completed example that you can use as reference if necessary.

Audience:	<i>Insert the name of the audience segment.</i>				
Description:	<i>Insert a description and data regarding this audience (including their stage of behavior change) that has informed the communication objective.</i>				
Communication Objectives	Barriers	Facilitators	Key Benefit	Key Information	Key Message
<i>Insert the communication objectives identified in Unit 6.</i>	<i>Insert main barriers to performing the desired behaviors as identified in Unit 4.</i>	<i>Insert main facilitators to performing the desired behaviors as identified in Unit 4.</i>	<i>Insert the key benefit the audience can expect by performing the desired behaviors.</i>	<i>Insert key points of information that the audience needs to know in order to be motivated to perform the desired behavior.</i>	<i>Insert brief key messages that contain a call to action and the benefit reaped from performing it.</i>

Link Message to Materials

Once key information and key messages have been identified they need to be linked to communication channels and materials. The SBCC strategy should outline clearly the communication channels that will be used and how the messages will be conveyed. This is discussed in **Unit 7**, where the “pros and cons” of different communication channels are highlighted as well as how they can best be used during an emergency. Messages can be disseminated in a variety of ways, including:

- **Orally**, through interpersonal communication and radio
- **Visually**, through print media and mass media, including billboards, posters and television
- **In written form**, through channels such as bulletins, flyers, newsletters, articles and press releases

When key messages and materials are combined, they must reflect seven important characteristics that increase their effectiveness. These are known as the “7 Cs” of Communication:

C**ommand attention:** Attract and capture the audience’s attention. Make it memorable!

C**larify the message:** Ensure the message is clear and easily understood.

C**ommunicate the benefit:** State the advantages (key benefit) of adopting the desired behavior.

C**onsistency counts:** Repeat the same message consistently and across communication channels to avoid confusion and enhance the impact of the message.

C**reate trust:** Ensure you use factual information and credible channels. Credibility of the message is essential, as without it, the message will go unheeded.

C**ater for the heart and head:** People are persuaded by both facts and emotions. Use both to maximize the appeal and persuasiveness of the message.

C**all to action:** Include a clear call to action stating exactly what the audience should do.

It is recommended that you review key benefit messages against the 7 Cs of communication before pretesting them, and **Worksheet 8.3** on the following page is intended to help you do that.

WORKSHEET 8.3: REVIEWING KEY MESSAGES AGAINST THE 7 CS OF COMMUNICATION

Purpose: This worksheet is a checklist that outlines key questions to assess whether your key messages reflect the 7 Cs of Communication.

Directions: Review each individual key messages (and accompanying materials if available) against the checklist below. Through the checklist, identify if there are areas of improvement and reformulate messages if necessary

Please note that this worksheet is followed by a completed example that you can use as reference if necessary.

Key Message: _____

7 Cs of Communication	Message Check	Yes	No	Suggestions for improving the message (if necessary)
Command Attention	Does the message stand out/capture the audience's attention?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Clarify the Message	Is the message simple, direct and easy to understand by the audience?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Communicate a Benefit	Is it clear what benefit the audience will reap by engaging in the desired action?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Consistency Counts	Are all messages consistent?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Can they be conveyed across different communication channels?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Create Trust	Is the message credible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Is the channel used credible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Cater for Head and Heart	Does the message contain logical and factual information?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Does the message use emotion?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Call to Action	Does the message clearly communicate what the audience should do?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Pretest Messages and Materials

Messages and materials, however clear and eye catching they may appear, always need to be pretested. Pretesting involves measuring the reaction of a selected group of individuals representing the intended audience, to draft materials, concepts or messages before they are produced in final form and disseminated.

Unfortunately, the importance of pretesting is often ignored due to time or budget constraints, or due to the belief that the information and materials are suitable for serving their intended purpose. In emergencies, foregoing pretesting may be even more common as key information needs to be conveyed quickly and in a timely manner.

Pretesting, however, is an essential component of all communication messages and materials and ensures that what is designed is really suitable for the intended audiences. Even during the most critical of times, we recommend that programmers try to get hold of key audience members to ensure that messages serve the purpose for which they are intended. **Table 15** below highlights a range of important aspects that can be pretested, providing some sample questions of how to assess each one.

Table 15: Pretesting Concerns

Aspect to Be Pretested	Description	Sample Questions
Attractiveness	Whether the message/material commands attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you like about this message/materials? • What do you not like about this message/material? • What was the first thing that caught your eye?
Comprehension	Whether the information is understood as intended	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the message/material say? • Who do you think the message/material is speaking to? • What words/sentences/images are difficult to understand?
Acceptance	Whether the material is culturally and socially acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything about this message/material that you find offensive or inappropriate? • Is there anything about this message/material that someone in your community may find offensive or inappropriate?
Relevance	Whether the information is of interest to the intended audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What type of people do you think should read/watch this message/material? • In what way are those people different from you or the same as you?
Call to Action	Whether the audience understands the call to action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the message/material ask the audience do to?
Persuasion	Whether the key benefit is persuasive and appealing to the intended audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think you should do what the message/material asks you to do? • How likely are you to do that and why?
Improvement	If and how the material needs to be improved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would you change in this material / message to make it more appealing to you? • What information do you think is missing? • What else, if anything, would you like to include in this message / material?

As demonstrated by the aspects in, pretesting serves to assess a range of important aspects that can maximize the effectiveness of messages and materials. Pretesting is therefore a crucial step in the development of a SBCC strategy, even in an emergency situation.

To support the effective pretesting, a list of useful tips is included below. Additional information on pretesting can be found at <http://www.thehealthcompass.org/how-to-guides/how-conduct-pretest>.



Tips for Effective Pretesting

- Always plan to pretest messages and materials.
- Conduct an initial pretest with technical experts and gatekeepers to ensure that the information is factually correct and acceptable.
- Conduct the second pretest with representative members of the audience intended for the messages/materials in question.
- Avoid providing background information and explaining the material at the start of the pretest.
- Use open questions (questions that cannot be answered with yes or no)
- Avoid leading questions.
- Ask the creative developers of the materials to pretest them as they may be biased and interpret answers incorrectly.