

Comparative Effectiveness of Disease Education Messaging

Performer: WebMD

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Regulatory Science Challenge

Selection of a messenger, or spokesperson, to communicate health messages to the public should follow an evidence-based approach. The role of a spokesperson is to deliver information, demonstrate behavior, or provide a testimonial. This spokesperson may be helpful in attracting attention, personalizing abstract concepts by modeling actions and consequences, eliciting positive cognitive responses during processing, heightening emotional arousal via identification or transfer of affect, bolstering belief formation due to source credibility, and facilitating retention due to memorability.

Celebrity spokespersons have long been used in public outreach, education efforts and advertising regarding disease awareness, with the premise that celebrities would be more effective than traditional health authority figures in conveying the desired health messages. There are few primary studies evaluating celebrities' impact on health and there are perhaps no studies contrasting the effectiveness of different categories of messengers in a controlled trial.

Project Description

WebMD will conduct a scientific survey of consumers to compare educational materials on similar topics: one set of materials will feature a celebrity, one set will feature an expert from a well-known medical or academic institution, and one set will feature an expert from a government agency. The test will run on WebMD.com across a selected disease state with a total of six educational materials:

- A celebrity article and video
- A medical/academic institution expert article and video
- A government agency expert article and video

Project Goals

- The goal of the project is to measure and compare user response, engagement, and attitudes towards each type of spokesperson for the disease state.
- User response, engagement, and attitudes toward the two formats (video and article) will also be assessed.

Project Results

The final report from the researchers to the FDA included the following results:

- For the article format, each of the three spokespersons had similar numbers of page views and time spent on the article.
- For the video format, the celebrity and academic spokespersons had more views than the government spokesperson. Completion rates were similar for all three videos.
- When asked to assess the spokesperson, ratings were similar when the content was viewed as an article. For the video, respondents described the celebrity as “inspiring” and the academic and government presenters as “authoritative.”
- For all formats and spokespersons, 60 - 70% of respondents reported an increased understanding of the topic presented.