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Public Health Texting with the Deaf Community

Overview:

The lack of ASL interpreters and adaptive technology at health departments has hindered our ability to communicate effectively with Deaf and hard of hearing populations, especially during emergencies. Fortunately, Deaf and hard of hearing people have high text message utilization and adoption.

We sought to develop communication strategies based on research evidence about how and why Deaf and hard of hearing individuals use texting. In this way, we could be more successful in using texting to address critical communication gaps.

Methods/Participants:

We used an approach to the research called Q Methodology, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods to arrive at groupings or "types" of users. Rather than looking for correlations between variables, Q Methodology looks for correlations between subjects across variables.

We used key informant interviews and literature review to arrive at a set of 46 different opinion statements related to texting. We then gave these opinion statements to 23 Deaf and hard of hearing texters and asked them to sort the statements along a continuum from agree to disagree. After they sorted the statements, we interviewed subjects about why they sorted the way they did. We then used a Q-factor analysis to sort different groups of people with similar feelings about texting and similar usage of texting.

The Q-sort elicited three groups of people with distinct uses and gratifications of texting. Correlations from the Q-sort and interviews were analyzed to identify specific characteristics of each group and to name each group.

Once we had a clear idea of how Deaf and hard of hearing community members use texting, we were ready to start creating text messages, but we wanted to make sure our messages were relevant and understandable. To do this, we developed a set of test text messages, derived from press releases and based on communications experience. We conducted in-person interviews with seven Deaf and Deaf-blind subjects and online surveys with 17 Deaf and hard of hearing subjects. We asked what elements were essential and what language was most understandable for messages.



Results:

The Q-sort identified 3 texter types, each with uses and thinking about texting that are distinct from the other types:

- **Convenience texters** see texting as an easy way to communicate; texting is fast and enables multi-tasking.
- **Informational texters** see texting as a tool for planning and managing work and life and as a conduit for facts and information; texting is useful and necessary, but not for conversations or for building relationships.
- **Social texters** feel that texting makes communication easy and fun; texting is essential for maintaining connections with friends and family.

Research involving the test messages revealed essential elements and design of messages for communicating with the Deaf community. Three specific recommendations arose: identification, information, and language. Subjects agreed that it is important for PH messages to include identification of the sender. When messages are identified as coming from PH, people will trust the sender and the message. Subjects also agreed that it is important to include a link to more information in the message. Some said that they often keep old messages for future reference, and having a link to more information in the message would be very useful. And subjects agreed that it is important to write messages using language that is accessible. For most Deaf people, English is their second language.

Recommendations:

Use the knowledge of texter types to inform communication and marketing strategies. Be sure opt-in message campaigns cover essential elements of each type of texter, such as emphasis on family and friend relationships for the social texter, ease and speed of texting for the convenience texter, and usefulness for planning and gathering facts for the informational texter. This way, campaigns will attract users from different texting groups.

Use the knowledge of language barriers to write meaningful and understandable messages. Use syntax and vocabulary that is easy to comprehend, including avoiding shorthand, jargon, and multi-syllable words. Include identification of the sender and links to more information.