

*Simple*

# *Designing* **Effective Health Messages**

The word "Simple" is written in a cursive, orange font, with a small orange stick figure holding a sign that says "Simple". To the right, another orange stick figure is climbing a ladder, with a third orange stick figure standing at the base of the ladder.

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## Introduction

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*Drug advertising just uses emotional appeals to convince people who don't even need the drugs to talk to their doctors.*

*Kids are all on social media, so if we want to reach them with information about health we have to be on social media, too.*

*There is so much media clutter.*

*How do we cut through that with messages about health?*

*Everything we produce needs to be at a sixth grade reading level or lower.*

*The garbage cans of our clinic are filled with education materials that get thrown out as patients are leaving the building.*

*How can we make this message culturally relevant without stereotyping?*

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The challenges facing health communication practitioners are innumerable. In the most trying of moments, they can also seem insurmountable. The goal cannot be simply to produce

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simple messages that are easy to understand. Rather, we must strive to produce creative and engaging health messages that achieve the desired effect – changing people’s health behavior in a positive way.

The idea for this book grew from our research and teaching while working together in The University of Texas at Austin Stan Richards School of Advertising & Public Relations. This might seem like an odd academic home for three health communication researchers, but it is a vibrant and creative School filled with people interested in the process of developing effective messages. And the University of Texas – and Austin broadly – is filled with potential collaborators interested in every health condition and patient population imaginable.

Our goal is to bring the perspective of advertisers, with a focus on creativity in research and message design, to the broader health communication world. Combined with the message design tools and approaches many of our readers are already familiar with – health communication theories such as the Health Belief Model or the Theory of Planned Behavior, or the campaign design process outlined in the National Cancer Institute’s Making Health Communication Programs Work – the result is more engaging and effective health campaigns.

The remainder of this book is divided into three sections. In Section 1, we provide the tools needed to design more effective health communication campaigns. This includes straightforward overviews of relevant health communication theories, a

discussion of principles of visual communication, and guidelines for plain language and clear communication. In Section 2, we discuss the traditional model of health communication campaign development, execution, and evaluation. We then supplement that with an in-depth look at a model of developing persuasive campaigns that advertising agencies have developed to solve a problem that also plagues many working in health communication – becoming too close to their problem and ceasing to think about it like a member of the target audience. In Section 3, we use a series of case studies of our own published research to show how we put these practices into action to solve real world health communication problems.

We find research and practice of health communication to be an invigorating, creative, and fun process. It is our hope that our enthusiasm and joy comes through in this book. We had a lot of fun working on all of the projects we describe and writing this book, and we hope you enjoy your time with us.