

"Attention Travelers!" Evaluating Health Communication for On-the-Move Audiences

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Introduction

T-HANs alert travelers to health risks

- Since the 1970s, Travel Health Alert Notices (T-HANs) have been used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to provide health alerts to international travelers arriving at U.S. ports of entry
 - T-HANs are distributed to travelers arriving from countries where outbreaks of communicable disease are occurring
 - T-HANs urge travelers to assess personal risk, monitor for symptoms, and seek health care if symptoms arise
- Evaluation efforts have ranged from formative evaluation with international travelers and physicians to outcome research with travelers arriving from Haiti during a cholera outbreak



Methods and Results

T-HAN content and design improve, and show effect on behavioral intentions

- Focus groups with international travelers** focused on format, design, and content of the T-HAN and predicting their likelihood to follow the recommendations provided on the T-HAN
 - Findings: Passport-sized, CDC-branded materials with clearly written, concrete information and simple action steps were preferred.
 - Most respondents indicated that they would follow the T-HAN's recommendations.
- Focus groups with physicians** who may treat patients with recent international travel histories focused on the kind of information that they would need to assess, treat and report a possible travel-related communicable disease
 - Findings: Greater detail about the disease of potential exposure and information about available resources to guide diagnostic testing and treatment were requested.
 - Respondents also indicated that the T-HAN should instruct travelers to call the physician's office before going in to ensure infection control precautions would be taken.
- In-person surveys with travelers** returning from Haiti who received a T-HAN in the Miami International Airport during the 2011 Haiti cholera outbreak focused on their need for health information and their likelihood of seeking health care if they developed symptoms. Web trends were also monitored through a unique CDC web address that was printed on the T-HAN for access to more information about cholera.
 - Findings: Respondents who read the material prior to the survey were more likely than nonreaders to report that they would be likely to seek health care for symptoms of cholera.
 - Though many respondents indicated a need for health information, the number of page views to the unique web address was low (Selent, 2011).



Challenges

T-HANs prove difficult, but not impossible, to evaluate

Communication campaigns can have measurable effects on attitudes and behaviors (Noar, 2006). The T-HAN seeks not only to educate but also to spur readers to action. Evaluating communication materials poses many challenges, particularly when they are seeking to change individual behavior.

- Restrictive environments:** CDC's opportunity to reach captive audiences of travelers is often confined to secure areas of ports of entry
 - Requires the permission and cooperation from federal and local authorities, who are often taxed through responding to the same public health emergency for their own agencies
 - Physical space for conducting interviews is limited, crowded and noisy in gate, passport, customs, and baggage areas where arriving travelers are most accessible
- Reluctant respondents:** Arriving travelers are often physically and mentally tired from their travels and unwilling to participate in even a short survey.
 - CDC staff must avoid approval-seeking bias by ensuring that respondents are aware that their participation is voluntary, particularly if interviews are conducted by U.S. government authorities with whom travelers must comply on other issues
 - Efforts to assess actual behavior change require intensive logistical and operational resources, and securing the elusive permission of en-route travelers or the cooperation of their physicians
- Time constraints:** Not only are travelers eager to depart from the airport, but there is often little or no opportunity for them to thoroughly read and understand the T-HAN
 - Evaluations are designed to delay the interview as long as possible from the time the traveler receives the material to allow for reading but in the rush to reach passport control and baggage, sometimes this may only be a few minutes

Lessons Learned

T-HAN evaluation challenges can be overcome

- Be thoughtful in design:** Plan evaluation strategies that find the best opportunities, taking into account location and timing of the interaction, to reach the traveler with minimum disruption to the travel process
- Strive for brevity:** Create short, concise evaluation instruments that get critical data in the shortest possible encounter
- Forge partnerships:** Build relationships with key partners in the airport environment before public health events that offer evaluation opportunities, and maintain agreements to operate in secure areas
- Advance the evaluation:** To assess the true effectiveness of the T-HAN, the evaluation must move from self-reported intentions to measuring behaviors beyond the airport environment by reaching travelers at home or in health care setting

