

TIPSHEETS

Messaging for Media Impact



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The Media Impact Project

Introduction



At the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, we believe in the power of media to make a difference. Yet we know that simply sharing information doesn't necessarily lead to social change. With thousands of stories competing for our attention each day across the media landscape, it's vital that change makers think carefully about how to construct messages in a way that will reach and impact as many people as possible.

We've spent years investigating how media stories can maximize their social impact through choices related to content, medium, and messenger. Through collaboration with partners ranging from documentary filmmakers to online news organizations, we've been able to study and evaluate a wide variety of programs and approaches. While there is no silver bullet to making impactful media, over forty years of research in the social and behavioral sciences points to a wide body of strategies, or "nudges," that can be leveraged to optimize messages for impact. We realized that most of this work had yet to be translated in one place for media practitioners and many are unaware of these insights and how they can be applied in online and broadcast media.

So we set out to create a series of brief "tip sheets" to address this need. With funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, this series was designed to help media makers optimize stories for impact with the help of social science. In each one, we introduce a psychological concept and the theory/research behind it, then provide a set of specific tips on how this theory can be applied across media platforms (e.g., film, journalism, etc.).

We hope that these sheets serve to inspire, educate, and empower media makers to integrate science into the art of storytelling for social change. We believe that media can make a difference and that science can help. Please read and enjoy these tips sheets and contact us if you have any questions or suggestions for future ones.

Thanks,

Beth Karlin
Senior Research Fellow
The Norman Lear Center

BRING IT HOME: Establishing Greater Issue Relevance

Have you ever encountered an appeal from a nonprofit working with people a continent away? For example, Amnesty International posts many ‘Urgent Action’ items, appealing for action for those suffering from cases of human rights violations, like the one to the right. However, it can be hard to be energized by these claims. In general, we find it hard to connect with people or events that feel so far away. One way to connect people to distant issues or events is to reduce what social scientists call ‘psychological distance.’¹



URGENT ACTION
DETAINED FOR ADDRESSING SEXUAL HARASSMENT
Egyptian authorities ordered the pre-trial detention of woman human rights defender Amal Fathy, for a total of 30 days, after she posted a video on her Facebook page in which she shared her experience of sexual harassment and criticized the government over its failure to address the issue.

Psychological distance refers to how near or far people perceive themselves to be from an event, person, cause, or issue. Research has found that people think about things that are psychologically distant more abstractly while they think about things that are psychologically close in concrete, actionable ways.²

There are four ways that things can be psychologically distant:

1. **Social Distance** — How similar is this event or person to me?
2. **Temporal Distance** — How far from the present moment is it happening?
3. **Hypothetical Distance** — How likely is it to happen?
4. **Spatial Distance** — How far away is it from me?

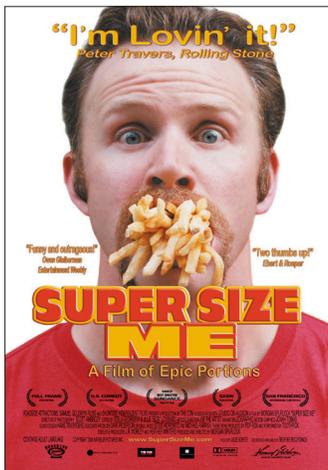
Psychological distance is driven by human’s egocentric tendencies.² Consequently, things that happen to members of other groups, events far into the future, things that may or may not happen, or events that occur physically far away are more psychologically distant and therefore less likely to capture our attention than things happening directly to us, current events, things that are certain to occur, and events that occur physically close to us.³

¹ Liberman, N. & Trope, Y. (2008). The psychology of transcending the here and now. *Science*, 322, 1201–1205.

² Pahl, S., Sheppard, S., Boomsma, C., & Groves, C. (2014). Perceptions of time in relation to climate change. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 5(3), 375–388.

³ Trope, Y., Liberman, N., & Wakslak, C. (2007). Construal levels and psychological distance: Effects on representation, prediction, evaluation, and behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 17(2), 83–95.; McDonald, R. I., Chai, H. Y., & Newell, B. R. (2015). Personal experience and the ‘psychological distance’ of climate change: An integrative review. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 44, 109–118.

Here are some ways you can use this in your own work:



1 GET PERSONAL: HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN YOUR AUDIENCE AND THE CAUSE

People feel less psychological distance to a cause when they identify with it. For example, in the documentary *Supersize Me*, Morgan Spurlock documents changes to his physical and psychological health over a month as he eats only fast food. By using a first person narrative, the filmmakers made the negative health effects of fast food personal and reduced viewers' psychological distance to the consequences of poor nutritional habits.

2 STRESS THAT THE TIME IS NOW: BRING CAUSES, CHARACTERS, AND/OR IMPACTS INTO THE PRESENT

To get people to take action, highlight how an issue or event is occurring now or in the very near future. Alternatively, use narratives that directly compare future events to ones happening in the present or recent past, i.e., describe future flooding caused by climate change as being similar to Hurricane Katrina, but more severe and more frequent.⁴

3 BE CERTAIN: EMPHASIZE THE CERTAINTY OF THE PROBLEM

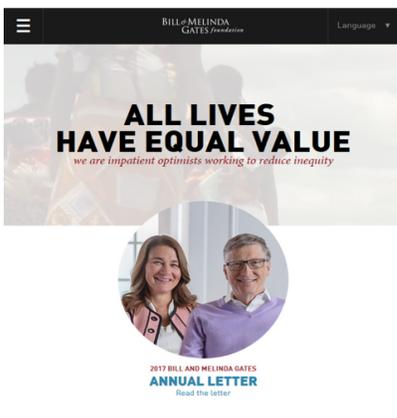
People care more about events that they believe will happen rather than things that may not. To help combat uncertainty surrounding a future event, highlight social consensus or statistics surrounding the problem.⁵

4 BRINGING IT HOME: REDUCE SPATIAL DISTANCE BY DESCRIBING LOCAL EFFECTS

Studies have found that people care more about local events than those that are far away. Therefore highlighting the impact of an event on local spaces or people (i.e., the water wasted could flood all of downtown) will increase interest and engagement.

5 CALL ATTENTION TO OUR MENTAL SHORTCOMINGS

Calling out people's tendency to ignore psychologically distant groups or events increases attention to these groups. For example, slogans such as 'where you live shouldn't determine whether you live' and 'all lives have equal value' (Kony 2012 documentary and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, respectively) as well as 'Black lives matter' are effective because they focus attention on people's tendency to ignore socially distant groups.

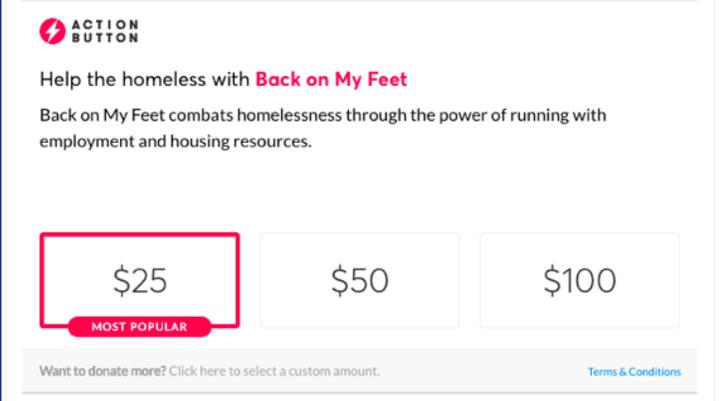
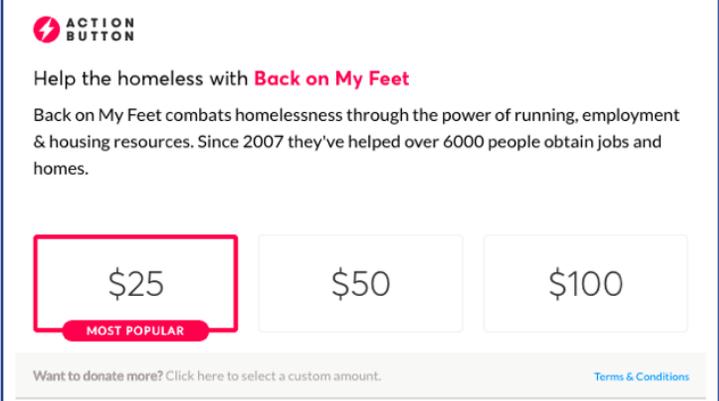


⁴ Markowitz, E.M., (2014) Center for Research on Environmental Decisions, & ecoAmerica. *Connecting on Climate: A Guide to Effective Climate Change Communication*. New York and Washington, D.C.: CRED & ecoAmerica

⁵ Moussaïd, Brighton, H. & Gaissmaier, W. (2015). *Risk amplification in diffusion chains*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

PHRASING MATTERS: The Benefits of Concrete Language

Using different types of phrasing, such as abstract or concrete terms, can influence how audiences perceive your message. These linguistic and descriptive choices are known as message frames and the way that phenomenon, events, or people are framed can have a significant impact on how people understand them.

ABSTRACT	CONCRETE
	

The concept of abstract and concrete framing is related to psychological distance (see “Bring it Home”). Construal level theory (CLT) describes the relationship between psychological distance and thinking about events or phenomena either abstractly or concretely. Specifically, CLT posits that events that are psychologically close to us (for example, happening now) are represented concretely, whereas events that are psychologically distant (happening in the future, the past, or far away) are represented abstractly.¹ These perceptions of distance in turn help guide our attitudes, evaluations, and ultimately behavior towards events.

This relationship is bidirectional — as people think more concretely about a subject, the closer in time, reality, and space it will seem; while people who think of subjects as being far away, in the future, or less likely, will think of the event more abstractly.

¹ Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological review*, 117(2), 440.

Here are some ways you can use this in your own work:

1 USE CONCRETE WORDS WHEN DESCRIBING HOW TO DO SOMETHING AND ABSTRACT WORDS TO DESCRIBE WHY IT SHOULD BE DONE.

Abstract language makes people think about why to take action, whereas concrete language makes people think about how to take action. Appeals framed so that people ask themselves why they want to do something are more effective when the decision is psychologically distant. Conversely, appeals framed so people ask themselves how they will do something are more effective when the decision is psychologically close.²

A study that explored the effectiveness of language used in political campaigns found that using abstract language emphasizes why a candidate was doing something (“right reasons and ideals” and “values-oriented” goals) was most effective when election day was far away (6 months & psychologically distant). Concrete concepts such as being “action-oriented” and focusing on “proper implementation,” were more effective when voting was much closer (one week and psychologically close). Another study found that when spending money (donating or buying), people are more likely to be persuaded to spend when the decision is described abstractly. When thinking abstractly, people are more likely to consider why they like something.

2 USE ABSTRACT LANGUAGE WHEN DESCRIBING DIFFICULT TASKS — AUDIENCES FEEL LESS DAUNTED.

Studies have found that when people think about tasks abstractly, they tend to underestimate how difficult and time consuming the task can be. Using abstract language to describe difficult tasks can therefore make audiences feel that requests are less difficult or cumbersome.³

3 TRY TO SIMPLIFY CONCEPTS — IT MAKES THEM SEEM LESS DISTANT

Complexity increases psychological distance, while simplicity decreases distance. Additionally, studies indicate that simple, concrete topics are perceived as psychologically closer than abstract topics.

4 USE PERSONAL ANECDOTES ALONGSIDE STATISTICS

People tend to evaluate the likelihood of an outcome depending on how readily it can come to mind. For example, when thinking about shark attacks, many people easily recall watching *Jaws* or Shark Week, which includes graphic depictions of shark attacks. Consequently, these images often easily come to mind when deciding if a shark attack is a legitimate fear. However, the fear of being bitten by a shark is statistically unfounded. In the United States, there is about one shark-attack fatality every two years — extremely rare relative to other events that people do not fear (in the coastal states lightning strikes kill more than 37 people every year⁴, for example).

Furthermore, evidence shows that risks presented as stories, first-hand accounts, and personal anecdotes can be particularly effective at capturing people’s attention, enhancing recall, and helping people better understand risks.¹⁰⁵ As people engage with these stories, they often connect them to their own personal experiences, making them memorable.

² Kim, H., Rao, A. R., & Lee, A. Y. (2008). It’s time to vote: The effect of matching message orientation and temporal frame on political persuasion. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(6), 877-889.

³ Thomas, M., & Tsai, C. I. (2011). Psychological distance and subjective experience: How distancing reduces the feeling of difficulty. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(2), 324-340.

⁴ <http://natgeotv.com/ca/human-shark-bait/facts>

⁵ Zebregs, S., van den Putte, B., Neijens, P., & de Graaf A. (2015). The differential impact of statistical and narrative evidence on beliefs, attitude, and intention: A meta-analysis. *Health Communication*, 30, 282-289.; deWit, J. B. F., Das, E., & Vet, R. (2008). What works best: Objective statistics or a personal testimonial? An assessment of the persuasive effects of different types of message evidence on risk perception. *Health Psychology*, 27, 110-115.; Allen, M., & Preiss, R. W. (1997). Comparing the persuasiveness of narrative and statistical evidence using meta-analysis. *Communication Research Reports*, 14, 125-131.

LOSING HURTS: The Power of Loss vs Gain Framing

Which sounds like the better choice — an option where you have a $\frac{2}{3}$ chance of losing, or an option where you have a $\frac{1}{3}$ chance of winning? Obviously, these are the same odds, but this example demonstrates how loss vs gain frames can impact people.

A loss framed message highlights the negative outcomes associated with failing to act while a gain framed message draws attention to the benefits of taking an action. People react to messages differently depending on if it is presented as a loss or as a gain — naturally, people want to avoid losses and seek out gains.¹ For example, looking at the figure above, most people find living longer (gain frame) more appealing than the alternative (loss frame). Research has also found that

people place more emphasis on potential losses relative to potential gains. For example, if given the opportunity to take a gamble with a 50% chance of winning \$10 and a 50% change of losing \$10, most people would choose not take the bet because the potential loss of \$10 overwhelms the potential gain of \$10. In fact, researchers have found that people generally find the negative experience of losing twice as powerful as the positive experience of gaining something.²

Prospect Theory describes how people evaluate potential losses and gains using mental shortcuts. And while these mental shortcuts are often a practical for making decisions, these shortcuts can lead to routine biases. These biases can be used to guide shifts in people's decision making processes.

You will live longer if you quit smoking.

You will die sooner if you do not quit smoking.

¹ Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1991). Loss aversion in riskless choice: A reference-dependent model. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 106(4), 1039-1061.

² Kahneman, D. & Tversky, A. (1992). Advances in prospect theory: Cumulative representation of uncertainty. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*. 5 (4): 297-323.

Here are some ways you can use this in your own work:

1 MATCH YOUR FRAME (POSITIVE/NEGATIVE) TO YOUR GOAL.

When trying to prevent people from doing something, focus on potential losses or negative outcomes. Focus on benefits to convince people to engage in an action.³ For example, research has found that positively framed appeals that focus on what a person can gain are more effective at getting people to take disease detection procedures than negatively framed loss messages.⁴

2 FRAME MESSAGES IN TERMS OF LOSING SOMETHING WE ALREADY POSSESS.

People overvalue things they already have. Research has shown that our aversion to loss often affects how much we think something is worth. Studies have found that people value what they already have significantly more than what they don't. For example, researchers asked two sets of participants how much they would pay for a mug. Participants who were first gifted this mug before being asked to name a price asked for twice as much as participants who were not given the mug first.⁵

3 USE LOSS-FRAMED MESSAGES WHEN DISCUSSING UNCERTAIN OUTCOMES AND GAIN-FRAMED MESSAGES WHEN DISCUSSING CERTAIN OUTCOMES.

Studies have shown that the framing of behaviors is more or less effective depending on whether choices are viewed as risks or gains and the outcome is perceived as more or less certain. People tend to be risk averse when dealing with two possible gains. For example, given a choice between getting \$75 for sure or a 50% chance of getting \$100, research shows that people tend to take the sure thing. However, when faced with a loss, people become more risk seeking. When asked to choose between a sure loss of \$75 or a 50% chance of losing \$100, people tend to prefer the latter option. Since both options result in a loss, why not pick the one where there is a chance of avoiding it? Accordingly, when outcomes are certain, people prefer gain framed-messaging.⁶ However, when outcomes are uncertain, loss framed messages, which stress the costs of non-action are more effective.⁷

³ Detweiler, Bedell, Salovey, Pronin, & Rothman, 1999

⁴ Das, Kerkhof, & Kuiper, 2008

⁵ Kahneman, D., Knetsch, J. L., & Thaler, R. H. (1991). Anomalies: The endowment effect, loss aversion, and status quo bias. *Journal of Economic perspectives*, 5(1), 193-206.

⁶ Toll, B. A., O'malley, S. S., Katulak, N. A., Wu, R., Dubin, J. A., Latimer, A., Meandzija, B., George, T. P., Jatlow, P., Cooney, J. L. & Salovey, P. (2007). Comparing gain-and loss-framed messages for smoking cessation with sustained-release bupropion: a randomized controlled trial. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 21(4), 534.

⁷ Banks et al., 1995; Schneider, Salovey, Apanovitch, et al., 2001

SOCIAL NORMS: Using the Power of the Crowd

If you've ever walked into a room and felt out of place because you weren't wearing the 'right' attire, you likely have been affected by a social norm. Social norms are expectations about what counts as the 'right' thing to do in a given situation and are influenced by the perceived social approval or disapproval of others. Social norms take advantage of our nature as social beings, our deep-seated desire to fit in, and our desire to be right. In fact, social norms can affect behavior even when we are unaware of this influence.



There are two primary types of social norms: descriptive norms, or perceptions of what other people are actually doing, and injunctive norms, or perceptions of what should or should not be done. Messages can use each of these norms either separately or in conjunction to influence audiences' attitudes and behaviors.

We often decide what to do in a given situation based on the extent to which we see (or believe) others perform a given behavior. This concept is exemplified by the classic 'broken windows theory' where visible signs of crime and vandalism, such as broken windows and graffiti, encourage further crime. People look to others and their social environment to understand what is appropriate or acceptable.¹

While this tendency to look to our environment and others serves us well most of the time, social norms can also have negative consequences, particularly when they inflate the perceived frequency or endorsement of negative or maladaptive behaviors. For example, heavy drinkers on college campuses tend to inaccurately inflate others' ideas of how much alcohol is accepted and consumed on campus, and this mistaken belief can lead other college students to increase their own alcohol consumption. Correcting these mistaken beliefs about the frequency of negative norms however, has been shown to influence more positive behaviors.²

¹ Muldoon, R., Lisciandra, C., & Hartmann, S. (2014). Why are there descriptive norms? Because we looked for them. *Synthese*, 191(18), 4409-4429.

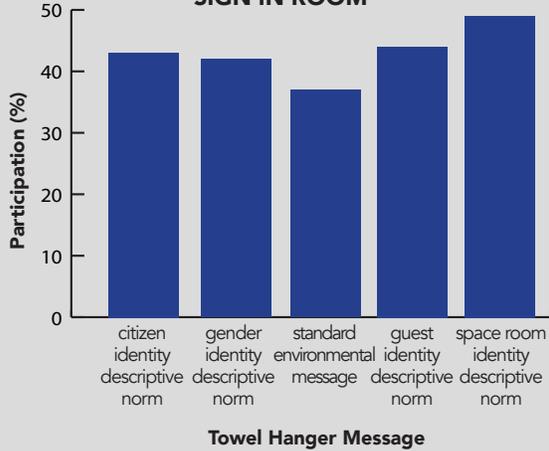
² Perkins, H. W., & Craig, D. W. (2006). A successful social norms campaign to reduce alcohol misuse among college student-athletes. *Journal of studies on alcohol*, 67(6), 880-889.; Perkins, H. (2003). *The social norms approach to preventing school and college age substance abuse: A handbook for educators, counselors, and clinicians*. Jossey-Bass.

Here are some ways you can use this in your own work:

1 ADD EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL NORMS TO INCREASE PERSUASIVE IMPACT

Highlighting a social norm has been shown to increase compliance to that norm. For instance, telling people that “9 out of 10 people in your town pay their taxes on time” is much more effective at increasing timely tax filing than simply telling people to pay their taxes on time. This strategy is frequently used in advertising campaigns that highlight products that are the “most popular,” “fastest selling,” or have “sold 10,000 copies” etc.

TOWEL REUSE RATES AS A FUNCTION OF SIGN IN ROOM

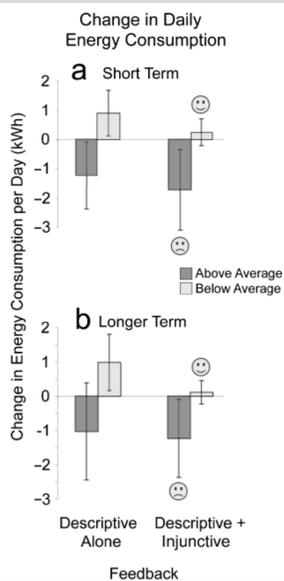


2 PINPOINT THE SOCIAL NORM AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

When using social norms, be specific, match the audience’s immediate situation, and highlight the specific target behaviors. For example, a study³ examined how different types of messages affected the number hotel guests who participated in an environmental conservation program. Researchers found that hotel guests exposed to messages that highlighted local norms specific to the guests’ situation (“the majority of guests in this room reuse their towels”) were the most effective at increasing guests’ pro-environmental behaviors, followed by messages that used general social norms (“Join your fellow guests in helping to save the environment”). Standard messaging without social norms that simply told guests to “help save the environment” were the least effective.

3 DRAWING ATTENTION TO NEGATIVE NORMS CAN BACKFIRE

Highlighting negative habits or behaviors can actually encourage others to copy that behavior. For example, research indicates that while well-intentioned, anti-smoking messaging such as “more than 3 million youths in the US smoke” and “3,000 people become regular smokers each day” can actually increase the number of people who smoke. Another study⁴ found that posting signs around Arizona’s Petrified Forest which read “Many past visitors have removed the petrified wood from the park, changing the state of the Petrified Forest” actually increased the amount of petrified wood taken by park visitors. Instead, messages that highlighted the right thing to do (injunctive norms), asserting the behavior was unacceptable, such as “Please don’t remove the petrified wood from the park,” were the most effective at curbing this behavior.



4 ENCOURAGE THOSE ALREADY DOING WELL TO BE BETTER.

People want to be normal. However, highlighting the frequency of others’ bad behaviors can encourage those who are already doing well to adopt those negative behaviors.⁵ Encourage people who already have positive behaviors. Researchers found that using messaging to tell residents about their neighbors’ energy consumption (descriptive norms) led households with consumption rates above the norm to consume less. This messaging also led households with consumption rates below the norm to consume *more* energy. However, researchers found that encouraging those with good behavior by adding smiley faces to messages given to low energy users and frowny faces for high energy users was an effective way to prevent low consumption homes from increasing their consumption after being exposed to the neighborhood average.

³ Goldstein, Cialdini & Griskevicius. (2008). A Room with a Viewpoint: Using Social Norms to Motivate Environmental Conservation in Hotels. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(3), 472-482.

⁴ Cialdini et al., 2006

⁵ Schultz, P. W., Nolan, J. M., Cialdini, R. B., Goldstein, N. J., & Griskevicius, V. (2007). The constructive, destructive, and reconstructive power of social norms. *Psychological science*, 18(5), 429-434.

SAYS WHO? Source Credibility

The U.S. 2016 Presidential Election and the prominence of “fake news” — articles intended to mislead and spread misinformation — has brought message sources into the forefront of modern discourse. Consequently, because solutions journalists and other mission-oriented media content producers aim to socially influence and encourage positive social change, content creators would be remiss to not consider how audiences react to who is relaying a message. There are many different factors which influence how effective a messenger is. In particular, credibility, attractiveness, celebrity, familiarity, similarity to audiences, and ingroup or outgroup status all influence how much people trust and believe messages.¹

Typically, studies have found that the best sources or spokespeople are perceived as having credibility — someone who is informed about the subject, your audience respects and trusts, has similar values and affiliations to your audience, and can identify and understand your audience’s needs and concerns.



Credibility is determined by how an audience evaluates a source in terms of their:²

- **Expertise** — how knowledgeable the source is believed to be in relevant subject matter.
- **Trustworthiness** — if the source is believed to have unbiased motives and intentions.³
- **Goodwill** — if the source cares about and understands the audience.⁴

¹ Gass, R. H., & Seiter, J. S. (2015). *Persuasion: Social influence and compliance gaining*. Routledge.

² Brinol, P., Petty, R. E., & Tormala, Z. L. (2004). Self-validation of cognitive responses to advertisements. *Journal of consumer research*, 30(4), 559-573.; Tormala, Z. L., Briñol, P., & Petty, R. E. (2007). Multiple roles for source credibility under high elaboration: It's all in the timing. *Social Cognition*, 25(4), 536-552.

³ Pornpitakpan, C. (2004). The persuasiveness of source credibility: A critical review of five decades' evidence. *Journal of applied social psychology*, 34(2), 243-281.

⁴ McCroskey, J. C., & Teven, J. J. (1999). Goodwill: A reexamination of the construct and its measurement. *Communications Monographs*, 66(1), 90-103.; Teven, J. J., & McCroskey, J. C. (1997). The relationship of perceived teacher caring with student learning and teacher evaluation. *Communication Education*, 46(1), 1-9.; Appelman, A., & Sundar, S. S. (2016). Measuring message credibility: Construction and validation of an exclusive scale. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 93(1), 59-79.

Here are some ways you can use this in your own work:

1 USE ATTRACTIVE OR CELEBRITY MESSENGERS IF POSSIBLE - THEY TEND TO BE MORE PERSUASIVE.

Prior research has found that more physically attractive sources tend to be more persuasive than less attractive ones.⁵ Similarly, audiences are more likely to be persuaded by celebrities because they are seen as more attractive, trustworthy, and familiar. However, the attractiveness or celebrity of a message source is most effective when audiences are not motivated to think deeply about an issue.⁶

2 HIGHLIGHT ANY MESSENGER SIMILARITIES OR FAMILIARITY WITH THE AUDIENCE.

Messenger similarity to or familiarity with the audience can also be an effective tool of persuasion. Messenger similarity is the extent to which a source is similar demographically or ideologically to the audience, while messenger familiarity is the extent to which the audience feels that they know the messenger.⁷ Consequently, when covering a story, making subjects more relatable will increase liking and trust of a message. Like attractiveness and celebrity, sources that are perceived as similar and familiar are also most effective when people are not thinking deeply about a topic. In other words, audiences are more likely to be persuaded by content with similar or familiar sources if they have little knowledge about a topic and/or have little motivation to think about the message.

3 EMPHASIZE HOW MESSENGER'S ARGUMENT AGREES WITH A LARGER CONSENSUS.

Whether or not people perceive the messenger to hold majority (popular) or minority (unpopular views) can also affect how people evaluate the source's message. Research has found that people believe messages that represent majority opinions when they have little motivation to learn about or have little knowledge of a topic.

4 WHEN FUNDRAISING, HIGHLIGHT PERSONAL RELEVANCE BETWEEN MESSENGER AND MESSAGE.

People are sensitive to the motives of a messenger.⁸ Specifically, researchers have found that people are more likely to donate if the request comes from someone who is personally connected to a cause; for example, people are more likely to support Handicap International if a donation request is made by the parent of a disabled child than a professional fundraiser.⁹ However, this strategy seems to be specific to donation and fundraising campaigns. Research has found that spokespersons or sources with a personal stake in an issue are viewed as less persuasive.¹⁰

⁵ Kang, Y. S., & Herr, P. M. (2006). Beauty and the beholder: Toward an integrative model of communication source effects. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 33(1), 123-130.; Reinhard, M. A., Messner, M., & Sporer, S. L. (2006).

⁶ Amos, C., Holmes, G., & Strutton, D. (2008). Exploring the relationship between celebrity endorser effects and advertising effectiveness: A quantitative synthesis of effect size. *International Journal of Advertising*, 27(2), 209-234.

⁷ Dembroski, T. M., Lasater, T. M., & Ramirez, A. (1978). Communicator Similarity, Fear Arousing Communications, and Compliance with Health Care Recommendations 1. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 8(3), 254-269.

⁸ Weinstein, N., DeHaan, C. R., & Ryan, R. M. (2010). Attributing autonomous versus introjected motivation to helpers and the recipient experience: Effects on gratitude, attitudes, and well-being. *Motivation and Emotion*, 34(4), 418-431.

⁹ Ratner, R. K., Zhao, M., & Clarke, J. A. (2011). The norm of self-interest: Implications for charitable giving. *The Science of Giving*, 113-131.

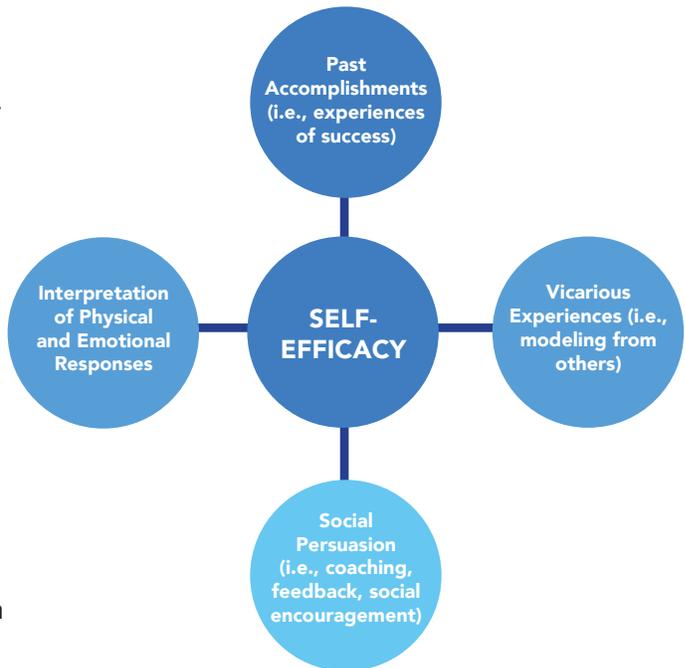
¹⁰ Eagly, A. H., Wood, W., & Chaiken, S. (1978). Causal inferences about communicators and their effect on opinion change. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36(4), 424.

EMPOWERING YOUR AUDIENCE To Take Action

Messages aimed at getting people to act can fall on deaf ears if people don't believe that they have the ability to solve the problem or that their efforts don't matter. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief that they have the ability, motivation, and social environment needed to achieve a particular goal or solve a problem.¹ Tapping into efficacy can serve as a powerful motivator in getting people to act — serving as a bridge between action and non-action.

People with high self-efficacy are more confident in their capacity to succeed in tasks, are more likely to take on challenging work, and are more willing to spend additional time and effort trying to accomplish tasks even when faced with setbacks.² In contrast, people with low self-efficacy generally tend to doubt their ability to accomplish goals and thus avoid difficult tasks or situations where they feel they will not succeed.³

So, simply having the knowledge of how to accomplish a task is not enough--people need to feel as though they are capable and that their effort will make a difference. Research into public service announcement (PSA) campaigns has shown that messages designed to increase people's self-efficacy can help them accomplish many different goals, such as getting breast cancer screenings or warning friends not to drink and drive.⁴



¹ Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Towards a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191-215.; Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist*, 28, 117-148.; Bandura, A. (2006). Guide for constructing self-efficacy scales. In F. Pajares & T. Urdan (Eds.). *Self-efficacy beliefs of adolescents* (Vol. 5., pp. 307-337). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

² Tschannen-Moran, M. & Hoy, A. W. (2007). The differential antecedents of self-efficacy beliefs of novice and experienced teachers. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 23(6), 944-956.

³ Hajloo, N. (2014). Relationships between self-efficacy, self-esteem and procrastination in undergraduate psychology students. *Iranian Journal of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences*, 8(3), 4-29

⁴ Anderson, R. B. (1995). Cognitive appraisal of performance capability in the prevention of drunken driving: a test of self-efficacy theory. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 7(3), 205-229; Anderson, R. B. (2000). Vicarious and persuasive influences on efficacy expectations and intentions to perform breast self-examination. *Public Relations Review*, 26(1), 97-114.

Here are some ways you can use this in your own work:

1 TELL THEM WHAT TO DO.

Don't underestimate the power of a direct ask. We have been working recently with companies who create "Take Action" buttons and find that being explicit with an ask is one of the most important things that you can do to engage people to take action. Sounds simple? It is!

2 WATCH OTHERS: INCREASE SELF-EFFICACY BY SHOWING OTHERS TAKING ACTION.

Studies have shown that observing relatable others completing a desired behavior--for example, performing self-health checks or reducing alcohol consumption can increase people's self-efficacy on those same behaviors.⁵ This increase in self-efficacy can in turn improve observers' own behavior. Further, the more similar the model, the more effective the message. Characteristics such as gender and age can influence how audiences interpret and respond to social marketing campaigns.⁶

3 EMPHASIZE HOW PEOPLE'S ACTIONS WILL HELP THEM ACCOMPLISH GOALS.

People are less likely to give to a charity if the problem seems large and their contribution is relatively small. Particularly for large problems like fighting poverty or global climate change, show how people's individual donations and contributions will make a tangible difference.

⁵ Bandura, A., & Walters, R.H. (1963). *Social learning and personality development*. Holt Rinehart and Winston: New York.

⁶ Knippenberg, Daan Van, and Henk Wilke. (1992) "Prototypicality of arguments and conformity to ingroup norms." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 22(2), 141-155.

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY with Numbers and Statistics

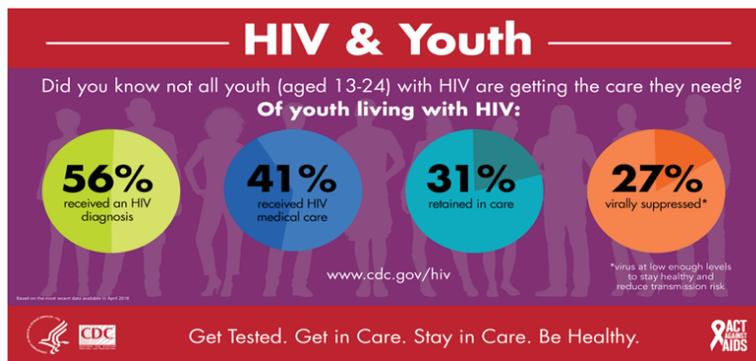
Statistics dominate our media, serving as evidence to support a claim or highlighting why audiences should engage with a cause. Yet, despite the influence and potential benefits statistics can possess, many readers do not know how to interpret or evaluate the meaning behind them. People generally use cognitive shortcuts and have biases when processing statistics, and these biases can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstandings about the frequency of events.

For most of our human history, we have not had to deal with the infinitesimally small, the vast, complex probabilities, relative risks, or survival rates. Instead, we needed to think about a small range of numbers and short-term trends and identify meaningful coincidences. Accordingly, people tend to make decisions using their intuition and typical ‘rules of thumb,’ rather than actually crunching the numbers. This bias makes sense — it’s easier and faster.

Most people don't have the time or motivation to pay attention to changes in base rates or probability.

As a result, statistics need to be contextualized to give meaning to such data. Frequently, these numbers can be re-framed, depending on the message involved, to tell a more

compelling story. For example, this infographic on HIV and youth limits its effectiveness by not contextualizing the statistics. What does it mean that 31% of youth living with HIV are retained in care — how many people does that correspond to?



Unfortunately, many campaigns do not present numbers in an easily understood manner. This is a problem in health communications as many campaigns tend to use probability and relative survival rates rather than using more intuitive, contextualized data, like frequencies. (See table below for example).

RELATIVE FREQUENCY

The data is presented as a ratio.

‘patients taking ibuprofen for arthritis face a 24% increased risk of suffering a heart attack’

ABSOLUTE FREQUENCY

The data is presented as a ‘total number.’

‘in a study of 1005 people there was one additional heart attack among people taking ibuprofen for arthritis than another medication.’¹

¹ Evans, I., & Thornton, H. (2009). Transparency in numbers: the dangers of statistical illiteracy. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 102(9), 354.

1 PRESENT STATISTICS WHEN MAKING COMPARISONS.

People often use percents as a benchmark to evaluate data and percentages are often more impactful than the actual numbers these percentages represent. One study² found that participants strongly supported an airport-safety measure that would save 98% of 150 lives than a measure that would save 150 lives. While logically 98% of 150 people is a worse airport safety measure, percentages/probabilities contextualize a statistic, allowing people to make judgments about how good or bad a particular measure is. Actual numbers do not provide this information on context. Compare statistics using the same type of number representation — the number of lives saved in one intervention must be directly compared to the number of lives saved in a different intervention.

3 USE THE SAME BASE RATE TO REPRESENT STATISTICS.

People generally fail to account for base rates.⁴ For example, a study found that people rated a disease that kills 1,286 out of 10,000 (12.86%) people as more dangerous than one that kills 24.14 out of 100 (24.14%) people.⁵ Even though the second disease is more deadly, people ignore the base rates (10,000 & 100) and instead focused only on the number of deaths. In another example, researchers found that participants who were rewarded with \$1 every time they drew a red jelly bean from a jar preferred to draw from a container with a more red jelly beans but a larger base rate (7 red jelly beans out of 100 total jelly beans) than a jar with fewer total red jelly beans but a smaller base rate and greater proportion of red jelly beans (e.g., 1 red jelly bean out of 10 total jelly beans). Even though the latter container had a better probability of winning, participants again ignored the difference in base rates.⁶ To correct for this tendency, report all statistics using the same base rate — people will more easily and accurately understand your statistics.

2 CONTEXTUALIZE YOUR STATISTICS.

Providing people with additional information about measurement units or statistics improves people's accurate understanding of these numbers. For example, researchers selected quotes from a major newspaper that included statistics. Some participants were exposed to the original quote ("The group says it has helped to preserve more than 120 million acres around the world") while others saw the original quote with some added context ("The group says it has helped to preserve more than 120 million acres around the world. To put this into perspective, 120 million acres of protected land is about 1.15 times larger than the state of California."). Those who viewed quotes with context recalled the statistics and were able to better estimate different but related data.³

4 BREAK DOWN LARGE NUMBERS.

People have a hard time fully understanding large numbers. They are easier to understand if they are broken down to a smaller size or placed on a more relevant timescale.⁷ The statement "1,206 people die from tobacco every day" is more effective than "440,000 people die from tobacco per year" because the former makes risks and other negative outcomes seem more tangible and relevant to audiences. These smaller frames are better at incentivizing precautionary behaviors. Short-term framing can reduce psychological distance and make negative outcomes seem less overwhelming. This reduces people's denial and inaction when faced with a daunting long-term time task.⁸ Research indicates that people are more likely to donate when larger sums are reframed into smaller numbers or temporally closer events. Reframing a single donation of \$730 to "\$2 per day," increases people's willingness to donate. The magnitude of the ask must be taken into consideration. If the ask is too high (i.e. \$4 a day), the effect reverses. A frame of "\$4200 per year" tends to be preferred to "\$11.50 per day."⁹

² Slovic, P., Finucane, M. L., Peters, E., & MacGregor, D. G. (2004). Risk as analysis and risk as feelings: Some thoughts about affect, reason, risk, and rationality. *Risk analysis*, 24(2), 311-322.

³ Barrio, P. J., Goldstein, D. G., & Hofman, J. M. (2016, May). Improving comprehension of numbers in the news. In Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 2729-2739). ACM.

⁴ Bar-Hillel, M. (1980). The base-rate fallacy in probability judgments. *Acta Psychologica*, 44(3), 211-233.

⁵ Yamagishi, K. (1997). When a 12.86% mortality is more dangerous than 24.14%: Implications for risk communication. *Applied Cognitive Psychology: The Official Journal of the Society for Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 11(6), 495-506.

⁶ Denes-Raj, V., & Epstein, S. (1994). Conflict between intuitive and rational processing: When people behave against their better judgment. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 66(5), 819.

⁷ Trick, L. M., & Pylyshyn, Z. W. (1994). Why are small and large numbers enumerated differently? A limited-capacity preattentive stage in vision. *Psychological review*, 101(1), 80.

⁸ Chandran, S., & Menon, G. (2004). When a day means more than a year: Effects of temporal framing on judgments of health risk. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(2), 375-389.

⁹ Gourville, J. T. (2003). The effects of monetary magnitude and level of aggregation on the temporal framing of price. *Marketing Letters*, 14(2), 125-135.

HARNASSING EMOTION

Making Feelings Matter

Many people have probably seen emotional charity appeals that tug on the heartstrings to help a child in need or save an abused animal. But when and how do emotions affect engagement with an issue?

Emotions exert a powerful influence on individuals — at times coloring our thoughts and behavior despite our best attempts to remain rational and unbiased. For example, research has shown that when forming preferences for politicians, how political candidates make people feel is more important than people’s beliefs about candidates’ traits and behaviors.¹ As such, appealing to emotions can be a helpful tool when trying to persuade people to act in a socially beneficial manner, such as getting health checkups, volunteering, or donating their time. Emotions vary on how positive or negative they are and how engaging the emotion is (high vs. low arousal).²

For example, calm is positive and not engaging, whereas excited is positive and high arousal. In particular, research indicates that this positive vs. negative dimension of emotion is especially important in influencing behavior.³ Because emotions vary on both valence and engagement, different emotions have distinct effects on our judgments, preferences, and behaviors. As such, tailoring emotional framing to match the message or needs of an organization can increase how much people recall and support issues.

However, before messages can influence people to act, they first need to capture and maintain audience attention — a scarce commodity given the new attention economy. Research suggests that negative emotions capture more attention than positive ones.⁴ For example, the PSA shown below uses negative emotion to grab and keep people’s attention.

DESCRIPTION OF AN ANTI-SMOKING PSA⁵

The words “The Truth” appear in white text on a black screen. The ad continues in black and white to show images of an old man, Victor Crawford. He begins by telling viewers that the tobacco company is targeting young children because “they don’t know better.” “They might get your sister or your brother...” He then admits that he was a tobacco lobbyist for 20 years and knows how the tobacco industry works. Finally, he apologizes by saying, “I lied and I’m sorry.” The ad concludes with four individually presented black screens containing the following text: “Victor Crawford died. He died of lung cancer. Tobacco is addictive. Don’t smoke.”

¹ Abelson, P. R. Kinder, D. R., Peters, D. M. & Fiske, S. (1982). Affective and semantic components in political person perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42, 619-630.

² Barrett, L. F. & Russell, J. A. (1999). The structure of current affect: Controversies and emerging consensus. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 8, 10-14

³ Cacioppo, J.T. & Gardner, W. L. (1999). Emotions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50, 191-214.

⁴ Fiske, S.T.(1980). Attention and weight in person perception: The impact of negative and extreme behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38, 889-906.

⁵ This advertisement example was taken from Dillard, J. P., & Peck, E. (2000). Affect and persuasion: Emotional responses to public service announcements. *Communication Research*, 27(4), 461-495.

Here are some ways you can use this in your own work:

1 HUMOR CAN DISARM PEOPLE WHO ARE THREATENED.

For people who are particularly threatened by negative information, humor can help overcome the anxiety of receiving bad news. A study found that people who were highly sensitive to experiencing distress reported increased intention to take precautionary health measures when exposed to humorous PSAs relative to PSAs that were not funny. However, there was no difference for people who were not particularly threatened by receiving negative information.⁶

2 MATCH MESSAGES TO THE MOTIVATIONAL NEEDS OF EMOTIONS.

Different emotions elicit different behavioral responses. As such, messaging is most effective when it matches the behavioral needs of a specific emotion. For example, guilt motivates people to take action⁷ whereas shame motivates people to reduce self-targeted harm.⁸ Researchers interested in reducing alcohol consumption found that invoking guilt was more effective when highlighting benefits (i.e. what you'll gain by drinking responsibly) whereas shame was more effective when focusing on losses (i.e., what you'll lose by drinking irresponsibly).⁹

3 BOOST PEOPLE'S SELF-ESTEEM BEFORE DELIVERING THREATENING NEWS.

People are motivated to feel good about themselves and receiving negative information (i.e. pointing out the negative health outcomes of smoking to a smoker) can threaten this. When people feel threatened or bad about themselves, they will often rationalize their negative behaviors or become defensive. However, making people feel good about other aspects of themselves before receiving bad news or experiencing a stressful event has been shown to improve people's reactions to threatening information.¹⁰ For example, researchers found that among people who did not have healthy diets, those who briefly reflected on an important personal characteristic ate more fruits and vegetables than those who did not.¹¹

4 PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED BY THE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS OF OTHERS.

People pay more attention to negative emotions. Additionally, including images is an effective way to capture people's attention and personalize subjects. Research has found that images that portrayed people looking sad generated significantly larger monetary donations than pictures in which people were neutral or happy.¹²

⁶ Conway, M. & Dubé, L. (2002). Humor in Persuasion on Threatening Topics: Effectiveness Is a Function of Audience Sex Role Orientation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28(7), 863-873.

⁷ Ketelaar, T., & Au, W. T. (2003). The effects of feelings of guilt on the behaviour of uncooperative individuals in repeated social bargaining games: An affect-as-information interpretation of the role of emotion in social interaction. *Cognition and Emotion*, 17(3), 429-453.

⁸ Hooge, I. E., Zeelenberg, M. & Breugelmans, S. M. (2007). Moral sentiments and cooperation: Differential influences of shame and guilt. *Cognition and Emotion*, 21(5), 1025-1042.

⁹ Duhachek, A., Agrawal, N. & Han, D. (2012) Guilt versus shame: Coping, fluency, and framing in the effectiveness of responsible drinking messages. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 49(6), 928-941.

¹⁰ Steele, C. M. (1988). The psychology of self-affirmation: sustaining the integrity of the self. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 21, 261-301.

¹¹ Fielden, A. L., Sillence, E., Little, L. & Harris, P.R. (2016). Online self-affirmation increases fruit and vegetable consumption in groups at high risk of low intake. *Applied Psychology, Health & Well Being*, 8(1):3-18.

¹² Deborah A. Small, Nicole M. Verrochi (2009) The Face of Need: Facial Emotion Expression on Charity Advertisements. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 46(6), pp. 777-787.

FEELING EACH OTHER Appealing to Empathy

Has a documentary ever made you cry? Emotions are powerful drivers of behavior, and can guide long-lasting opinions and actions towards different issues.¹ However, not all emotions are created equal – certain emotions, like empathy, are more impactful at influencing behavior than others.²

Empathy is the understanding of and sensitivity towards others' feelings.³ When experiencing empathy, people experience others' positive and negative feelings, take others' perspectives and identify with the other person. Research has found that people can "catch" and experience the emotions of others, a phenomenon called "emotional contagion." Emotional contagion happens automatically and without effort. People understand and experience the emotions of others by first recognizing the emotion someone is feeling, mimicking the emotion, and then experiencing the emotion themselves.⁴ Experiencing the emotions of others in turn can affect people's behaviors, can change attitudes, and can increase the extent to which people want to engage with a cause.

For example, research has found that people who reported experiencing empathy for different stigmatized groups (homeless people, people who are HIV positive) also reported more positive attitudes towards these groups than people who did not empathize.⁵ Additionally, studies have found that experiencing empathy increases people's willingness to help others.⁶

Here are some ways you can use this in your own work:

IMAGES ENHANCE EMPATHY

1 Research examining the use of images in charitable appeals indicates that images increase persuasion, message recall, and higher donations compared to image-free appeals.⁷ According to the research findings by Upworthy, adding images to media content increased click rates and attention time, with images eliciting higher reported levels of empathy for the characters and communities mentioned in the content.

¹ Baumeister, R.F., Vohs, K. D., DeWal, C.N., & Zhang, L. (2007). How emotion shapes behavior: Feedback, anticipation, and reflection, Rather Than Direct Causation. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 11(2),167-203.

² Decety, J., Bartal, I. B.-A., Uzefovsky, F., & Knafo-Noam, A. (2016). Empathy as a driver of prosocial behaviour: highly conserved neurobehavioural mechanisms across species. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 371(1686), 20150077. <http://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2015.0077>

³ Decety, J & Jackson, P. L. (2006). A social neuroscience perspective on empathy. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15(2), 5-58.

⁴ Hatfield, Elaine; Cacioppo, John T.; Rapson, Richard L. (June 1993). "Emotional contagion." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 2 (3): 96–99. doi:10.1111/1467-8721.ep10770953.

⁵ Batson et al. (1997). Empathy and attitudes: Can feelings for a member of a stigmatized group improve feelings towards the group? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72(1), 105-118.

⁶ Pavey, L., Greitemeyer, T. & Sparks, P. (2012). "I Help Because I Want to, Not Because You Tell Me to": Empathy Increases Autonomously Motivated Helping. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38(5), 681 - 689.

⁷ Houts, P. S., Doak, C. C., Doak, L. G., & Loscalzo, M. J. (2006). The role of pictures in improving health communication: a review of research on attention, comprehension, recall, and adherence. *Patient education and counseling*, 61(2), 173-190.

2 IDENTIFY & HIGHLIGHT SPECIFIC IMPACTS

People are more likely to donate when they understand the tangible impact of their donation. Researchers found that simply telling potential donors about how their money would be spent or about an organization's specific projects increased donations.⁸ Charities use this strategy by asking people to support specific children and providing donors with information on exactly how this child will benefit (food, vaccinations, school tuition). Far from being the most effective mechanism of support, this strategy is popular because it personalizes the impact of donations.

Statistical lives

- Food shortages in Malawi are affecting more than 3 million children.
- In Zambia, severe rainfall deficits have resulted in a 42% drop in maize production from 2000. As a result, an estimated 3 million Zambians face hunger.
- Four million Angolans — one third of the population — have been forced to flee their homes.
- More than 11 million people in Ethiopia need immediate food assistance.

Identifiable lives

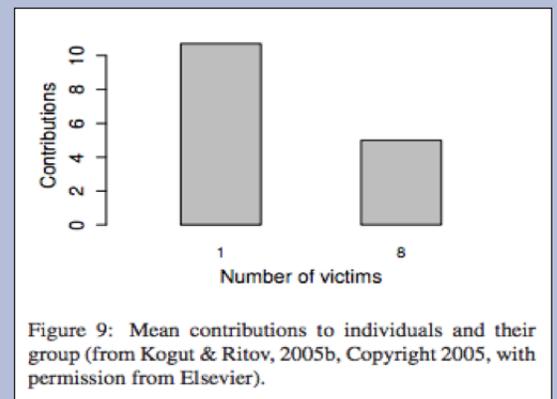
Rokia, a 7-year-old girl from Mali, Africa, is desperately poor and faces a threat of severe hunger or even starvation. Her life will be changed for the better as a result of your financial gift. With your support, and the support of other caring sponsors, Save the Children will work with Rokia's family and other members of the community to help feed her, provide her with education, as well as basic medical care and hygiene education.



Figure 7: Donating money to save statistical and identified lives. Reprinted from Small et al. (2007). Copyright (2007), with permission from Elsevier. (Photograph has been altered.)

3 DEPICT AND IDENTIFY INDIVIDUALS

Counterintuitively, as the number of people in need increases, the amount of concern people feel for the needy group decreases. Researchers found that people exposed to a single needy individual contributed more than people exposed to a small group of needy individuals.⁹ The more a singular victim is identified (the victim is pictured, or the audience knows personal information about the victim), the more likely people are to help.¹⁰ Research found that people donate more money when a single victim is identified than when a single victim is not identified. However, when victims were presented in groups, people donated the same amount regardless of whether or not the victims were identified.¹¹



4 NARRATIVES CAN EVOKE EMOTION

People feel more connected to and identify with individuals more than groups of people. As a result, creating narratives centered on the experience of individuals is an effective way to get people to connect with a cause.¹² In a study analyzing the impact of exposure to a news story about mass suffering and violence in Africa, people who read narrative versions of the story that focused on how this violence affected individuals reported greater emotion and increased donations relative to versions that included images or statistics.¹³

5 USE IMAGES WITH HUMAN FACES

People notice and pick up on the emotions of others. People empathize more with individuals than with groups of people. As such, including images with human faces both individualizes people in need and increases the extent to which readers/viewers catch the emotions of the person pictured. Research has found that websites with facial images yielded more positive reactions, compared to those without facial images and those lacking any sort of human images.¹⁴

⁸ Cryder, C. E., Loewenstein, R., & Scheines, R. (2013). The donor is in the details. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 120, 15-23.

⁹ Kogut, T., & Ritov, I. (2005). The singularity effect of identified victims in separate and joint evaluations. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 97(2), 106-116.

¹⁰ Jenni, K. & Loewenstein, G. (1997). Explaining the Identifiable Victim Effect. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*. 14 (3), 235-257.

¹¹ Kogut, T., & Ritov, I. (2005). The "identified victim" effect: An identified group, or just a single individual? *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 18(3), 157-167.

¹² Braddock, K. & Dillard, J. P. (2016) Meta-analytic evidence for the persuasive effect of narratives on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. *Communication Monographs*, 83(4), 446-467.

¹³ Maier, S. R., Slovic, P. & Mayorga, M. (2016) Reader reaction to news of mass suffering: Assessing the influence of story form and emotional response. *Journalism*, 18(8), 1011-1029

¹⁴ Cyr, Head, Larios, and Pan, 200