

ABSTRACT

Awareness to Action: The role of value-based messaging in communicating actionable risk to the public

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Paragraph:

In 2011, California Earthquake Authority (CEA) and California Emergency Management Agency (Cal EMA) partnered Value-Based market research to develop of a communications strategy persuasive and effective in moving California residents to a higher level of earthquake preparedness than currently exists. Prior sociology research recommended that educators “brand the message” but did not address a key component of any communications strategy – “what to say” - that will move more Californians to take more readiness actions. Using Harris Interactive’s proprietary VISTA™ (Values In STRategy Assessment) methodology, research focused explicitly on understanding and identifying the most personally compelling personal values in the decision-making process. This approach allows identification of the underlying needs and motivations of California residents as it relates to readiness and preparedness; showing how the rational and emotional components of decision-making are linked. The outcome of VISTA™ is a communications template, or map, depicting the decision-making thought process that gives a blueprint for action – those important factors that motivate our target audience toward immediate and long-term action.

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California Earthquake Authority (CEA) and California Emergency Management Agency (Cal EMA) partnered to invest in message development market research, intended to guide the development of a communications strategy that will be persuasive and effective in moving California residents to a higher level of earthquake preparedness than currently exists. Prior sociology research efforts form the foundation for the current engagement with the recommendations that earthquake educators “brand the message” and not the messenger and develop an evidence-based standardized message, to be delivered in a consistent manner over multiple channels, over a long period of time, via a coordinated campaign among the various local, state and federal programs and agencies engaged in earthquake preparedness. However, previous research studies did not address a key component of any communications strategy – the actual message - “what to say” - that will be needed to move more Californians to take more readiness actions.

The overall framework guiding the Value-Based Research undertaken by CalEMA/CEA in 2011 and conducted by Harris Interactive, is the VISTA™ (Values In STRategy Assessment) methodology. This proprietary research methodology focuses explicitly on understanding and identifying the most personally compelling personal values in the decision-making process. This approach allows identification of the underlying needs and motivations of California residents as it relates to readiness and preparedness. Just as important, the VISTA™ approach shows how the rational and emotional components of decision-making are linked. The outcome of VISTA™ is a communications template, or map, depicting the decision-making thought process that gives a blueprint for action – those important factors that motivate our target audience toward immediate and long-term action.

The qualitative and quantitative research identified two key “pathways” of communication that lead the audience from what actions we want them to take through the emotional and value-based reasons it is important to them. The short-term “response” pathway begins, at an attribute level, with gathering and organizing supplies, contact information and putting together a family disaster plan. This leads people to feel they will be “ready and able,” the functional, specific benefit of having those supplies, when an earthquake strikes so that they can take care of their families. Family protection was a strong and motivating element during every phase of research and was true for every demographic group interviewed. At an emotional level, being ready leads to feeling in control and that one will survive (both immediately and over the longer term). And ultimately, this gives people confidence and peace of mind which are the values associated with the seemingly simple task of gathering emergency supplies. The long term “recovery” pathway begins with concerns about one’s physical belongings and the structure itself leading to a benefit that one has mitigated their potential injury or damage, to themselves or their property. These actions and benefits lead to feelings of being in control and of survival which, like the short-term side of the map, leads to the values of peace of mind and confidence.

Importantly, when thinking about message development, regardless of whether subjects started at the short or long-term attribute level, they identified common emotional consequences (survival and control and common values (peace of mind and confidence). This suggests that all communications, regardless of the agency, program, product or service offered needs to communicate these emotions and values.

A third “negative” pathway was also identified. This pathway started with people admitting that they are in denial regarding earthquakes; that they procrastinate when it comes to getting more prepared and that in the course of their daily lives; that other things become more important. This general malaise regarding earthquake preparedness leads people to feel that they have not done enough to be prepared and will not be ready when an earthquake strikes. Ultimately, this pathway results in low self-esteem and lack of peace of mind. While it is important to be aware of this pathway and recognize that a significant portion of the population fits into this framework, we strongly recommend against negative messaging inducing feelings of guilt.

Based on this Value-Based Market Research, the following framework is recommended to agencies engaged in earthquake education when they evaluate existing communications or develop new ones: Talk about why preparedness is important to do (the emotional and value level), not just what they should do (attribute and functional consequence level). Every communication should connect the attribute (i.e., kit, disaster plan, etc) with the value associated with it (i.e., peace of mind, confidence). Emotions and values can and should be communicated using both words and images. Avoid using guilt as the emotional pull of communications. Communicate often using a variety of mediums; short term or one-off campaigns will likely not produce the desired result. Communicate in a consistent manner. The emotions and values identified here will apply to the short and long terms aspects of earthquake preparedness so it’s important to have that guide communications. The emotional and value level findings are true across demographic groups, regardless of age, race/ethnicity or where one lives in California (i.e. more risky or less risky area). Specific campaign strategies (i.e. media buying, placement, etc) may need to be tailored for different populations but the main themes of the message - family protection, survival, control - are true across the board.