

# Communication Science



RTI International's communication science professionals promote informed decision making by developing, implementing, and evaluating strategic communications, interventions, and campaigns for our clients. We examine how people seek, use, and process information and how they make decisions by exploring social, cultural, market, and media influences. We apply social marketing principles and techniques to promote behavior change and create social impact.

## Overview

Our goal is to improve communication and discourse about scientific knowledge to help people make informed decisions regarding individual behaviors, community action, social policy, and resource investments. We design integrated marketing, communication, and media strategies and products that convey information to users in a way they can understand and act on. Our messages, interventions, and campaigns are theoretically grounded and disseminated using a variety of innovative digital and social media as well as traditional channels. We add to scientific and policy discussions by conducting comprehensive evaluations to determine their impact on knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. We document the effects of communication programs and policies and make recommendations about how to improve their effectiveness.

## Capabilities

People are often challenged when presented with complex information, and may find it difficult to interpret such information when making important decisions. We strive to improve the information exchange among scientists and consumers, providers, and policy makers to bridge the gap between those who have information and those who might benefit from it. We help people

understand the trade-offs between the risks and benefits of choices and the uncertainties associated with the evidence base. Our innovative methods can be applied to a range of issues that affect people's daily lives, including public health and health care, the environment, energy, education, finance, and public and personal safety. We apply strengths in theory-based formative research, social marketing, knowledge translation, science writing, digital strategy, behavioral economics, and user-centered design.

To ensure that communications are effective, we first study users' information needs and preferences and their ability to process and understand the information. We examine information sources and information-seeking strategies. By understanding audiences and using responsive design strategies to co-create with them, we are able to integrate users' perspectives. We investigate the broader information environment that people engage in every day to ensure that our messages and campaigns have relevant context. By leveraging the information sources people regularly use and trust, we can

- Expand the potential reach of interventions
- Engage users in interactive communication platforms
- Enable message sharing across users' social networks
- Explore new ways to influence and create social change.

As a multidisciplinary institute, RTI is uniquely positioned to provide a broad spectrum of communication services, including

- Conducting formative research
- Developing and implementing strategic communications
- Designing and conducting randomized experiments
- Evaluating programs, policies, and campaigns using a variety of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

## Experience

Our goal is to be a trusted advisor to our clients by applying best practices in communication research, design, and delivery. An overview of selected projects follows.

**Health Literacy Skills Instrument.** We developed the Health Literacy Skills Instrument (HLSI) to assess four separate domains:

- Print literacy (reading and writing)
- Numeracy skills (mathematical skills)
- Oral literacy skills (listening)
- Information seeking (navigating the Internet and health systems).

The HLSI is an objective measure for intervention research studies, practice-based assessment, and surveillance. It is available for public use at [www.rti.org/hlsi](http://www.rti.org/hlsi).

**Developing and Testing Electronic Decision Aids.** Decision aids support shared decision making among consumers, patients, families, and health care providers. They can decrease information complexity, enhance communication, and promote behavior change.

We assisted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) with development and pilot testing of Positive Health Check, a digital health, web-based video counseling intervention that aims to improve clinical health outcomes among people living with HIV (PLWH). Through English-language videos, the tool delivers prevention messages and behavior-change tips that are individually tailored for each patient. Positive Health Check is one of the first tablet-optimized, web-based video interventions for PLWH attending HIV primary care clinics; the format is relatively low-cost for clinics and enables rapid content updates.



We also created tools that support informed decision making about genetic sequencing for parents of newborns and young children and an interactive tool to support decision making about clinical trials for the National Institutes of Health.

**HIV.** Advances in HIV treatment philosophy (“treatment as prevention”) coupled with new biomedical approaches (pre-exposure and post-exposure prophylaxis) are changing the HIV prevention landscape. Effective communication campaigns can promote HIV awareness, dialogue, knowledge, testing, prevention, and engagement in care, while also combating misperceptions and complacency. We conduct formative research that is critical to the development of successful communication campaigns and comprehensive process and outcome evaluations that inform policy and future funding decisions.

**Emerging Infectious Diseases.** With recent worldwide focus on diseases such as Ebola and Zika, we have mobilized to respond to public health needs and social concerns. Our scientists have worked on a variety of internally and externally funded social science projects and communication campaigns. That work has included English and French surveys of travelers arriving to the United States from Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia regarding Ebola screening efforts; development of campaigns in English and Spanish to educate residents in Puerto Rico regarding Zika virus control and considerations; and efforts to track news, social media content, and information search behavior in the United States, Guatemala, and Brazil.

**Web-Based HIV Prevention Decision-Making Tool.** Working with CDC, we created an interactive web-based tool known as the HIV Risk Reduction Tool to help individuals assess and reduce their risk of acquiring or transmitting HIV. The tool allows individual users to tailor their information to obtain customized information on behaviors that place them at risk for HIV and strategies to mitigate that risk. Designing a web-based tool provides consumers and health professionals with prevention messages that focus on behavioral change, risk assessment, and risk reduction dialogue.

**Risk Communication.** We work with organizations such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to compile evidence on consumer and provider engagement with advertising and marketing (e.g., direct-to-consumer [DTC] prescription drug advertising). Examples include the following:

- Investigation of consumer experience with online prescription drug information
- Content analysis of DTC advertising via web-based and mobile communications
- Surveys of health care professionals' perceptions of DTC and consumers' needs and preferred sources of information related to prescription drugs
- Studies of consumer response to corrective advertising intended to counteract misleading DTC advertising (e.g., results that appear in the lead article of a 2015 special issue of the *Journal of Communication* on misinformation)
- Experimental studies to examine how risks and benefits of prescription drug information in DTC advertising are received by adolescents
- Investigation of how implied and overt drug label comparative claims in DTC commercial advertising influence consumers' perceptions, intentions, and behaviors regarding prescription drugs. RTI created both print and video advertising for mock prescription drugs.

**Integrated Marketing and Media Campaigns.** We connect with and engage people and communities of interest through high-impact messages and next-generation strategies that attract attention and inspire action. We work with clients to develop award-winning,

scientifically grounded communication that is clear, accurate, and credible. Tapping into the art and science of communication, we help shape the conversation through paid, earned, and owned media strategies, bringing to bear a portfolio of evidence. For example, our provider-focused campaign portfolio helps clients navigate the information needs and media habits of those on the frontlines working with patients and clients in the fight against HIV. By forming strategic partnerships with organizations like Medscape, Elsevier, and PatientsLikeMe, we help clients enlist today's digital media environment to expand reach and drive engagement.

Our experience includes the following:

- With CDC, we developed Show Your Love, a social marketing and communication campaign that focuses on encouraging preconception health among multicultural women ages 18–44. Show Your Love has earned two Telly awards and a Blue Pencil & Gold Screen award from the National Association of Government Communicators.
- We manage the CDC-funded *HIV Screening. Standard Care.* (HSSC) campaign for health care providers to routinely screen all patients ages 13–64 for HIV. In partnership with the *American Journal of Medicine*, RTI developed and hosts an online, peer-reviewed resource center reaching more than 500,000 clinicians. RTI develops continuing medical education and placement of physician-targeted print and electronic advertising. We have expanded HSSC's social media outreach through physician-led speaker series blogs and posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.





**Reducing Health Care Disparities and Improving Clinical Outcomes.** We collaborated with the Merck Foundation to help address health care disparities with respect to type 2 diabetes. RTI conducted a 5-year, cross-site evaluation of multilevel, multicomponent clinical and community interventions among five grantees. The evidence-based interventions were guided by the Chronic Care Model that aimed to engage patients in care and support communication with their health care providers during clinical encounters. Each grantee adapted the interventions to the local needs and strengths in their communities. The initiative successfully reduced health care disparities and improved a number of clinical outcomes.

**Tools for Improving Health Care Quality and Patient Safety.** We develop tools and products to ensure that health care professionals and consumers have accurate information to make better decisions. Examples include web-based “Doc Alerts” to transmit U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommendations to physicians via handheld devices and expert briefs, keynote speeches, presentations, consumer advice columns, and commentaries on important health care topics.

**Substance Abuse and Addiction.** We have a long history of working to expand knowledge about the consequences of substance abuse and the efficacy of programs that combat it. For example, we synthesize research findings and data into print and web-based materials on the use and abuse of anabolic steroids, cocaine, prescription drugs, and tobacco. We also conduct formative research to assess women’s knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors regarding alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

**Global Health.** To transfer global health–related knowledge to decision makers and policy makers, we study international health trends, emerging programs and technical issues, and future information needs. Our work includes designing and developing communication strategies, marketing campaigns, and other tools to increase awareness and knowledge of several health promotion and disease prevention topics.

---

#### More Information

Jen Uhrig, PhD  
Director, RTI Center for Communication Science  
919.316.3311  
uhrig@rti.org  
RTI International  
3040 E. Cornwallis Road, PO Box 12194  
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-2194 USA

RTI 6192 R10 0816



RTI International is one of the world’s leading research institutes, dedicated to improving the human condition by turning knowledge into practice. Our staff of more than 3,700 provides research and technical services to governments and businesses in more than 75 countries in the areas of health and pharmaceuticals, education and training, surveys and statistics, advanced technology, international development, economic and social policy, energy and the environment, and laboratory testing and chemical analysis. For more information, visit [www.rti.org](http://www.rti.org).

RTI International is a registered trademark and a trade name of Research Triangle Institute.

