Designing an Effective Fear Appeal

Last month I addressed the topic of using scare tactics to activate safety-related behavior. I attempted to dispel the popular notion that fear appeals don't work by referring to the latest research in this area. The bottom line was that fear tactics can be effective when they incorporate both self-efficacy and response-efficacy. More specifically, you can scare people into performing specific safety-related behavior if the message convinces the audience that: a) they have the necessary skills to execute the desired response (self-efficacy), and b) the safety-related action will have the desired effect, namely of removing the need to be fearful (response-efficacy). Thus, an effective fear message activates motivation to avoid a feared consequence, and provides a specific means for meeting the avoidance objective that the audience perceives as relevant and doable.

There's more to designing an effective presentation to direct and motivate action through fear. That's the focus of this article. I want to answer the question, "In addition to self- and response-efficacy, what other factors determine the behavioral impact of a fear appeal"?

The Structure of the Fear Appeal

Let's begin with an operational definition of "fear appeal." Simply stated, a fear appeal is a persuasive message that attempts to direct and motivate certain behaviors by focusing on the harmful physical or psychological consequences that can be avoided by complying with message recommendations. The fear appeal has two basic ingredients: a threat component and an action component. Let's consider how to make each of these components effective.

The Threat Component

This is the motivating aspect of a fear appeal. An effective scare tactic must convince the audience that particular negative consequences can occur if certain behaviors are not performed. The more fear aroused, the more potential motivation to comply with the message. As I mentioned in my *ISHN* article last month, relevant case studies work better than statistics to stimulate the fear emotion. In other words, the effective fear appeal personalizes the risk for the target audience.

Presentations that make the message recipients feel vulnerable or susceptible to severe physical or psychological harm have a potent threat component. When an audience can visualize the negative consequences happening to them, personal apprehension is activated and the individual is receptive to learning strategies for avoiding the feared consequence. Common sense and research tell us that this emotional state is not activated with the kind of group or organization statistics presented so often at safety meetings. A personal story from an individual similar to the audience heightens perceptions of vulnerability and thus makes the threat seem real, relevant, and frightening. Now the audience is ready for the action component.

Action Component

You already know the essential ingredients of an effective action component. I covered these in my *ISHN* article last month and reviewed them above. These are self-efficacy and response-efficacy. Again, the target audience needs to believe they have the ability to follow the message recommendations (self-efficacy), and that the behavioral strategy specified in the fear appeal can eliminate or at least reduce the threat.

Removing system barriers to safe behavior and establishing a supportive recognition process, for example, increases self-efficacy. And response-efficacy is enhanced when the presentation provides audience-relevant examples of the message recommendations actually removing the threat of injury.

Here again testimonials are hard to beat. An employee who relates a personal experience of avoiding serious injury by performing a certain activity demonstrates both self-efficacy ("He did it without much effort.") and response-efficacy ("The proactive behavior worked.").

I know a safety leader who exhibited a pair of safety glasses with a cracked lens and a sign with the employee's name and department. He claimed this simple demonstration motivated more consistent use of safety glasses than any other strategy he had previously tried. This simple display reminded viewers of a serious threat that was relevant to them and showed an action strategy that was visibly effective and easy to perform.

Framing the Fear Appeal

What kind of threat is most motivating – one that emphasizes the benefits of a certain safety or health practice or one that focuses on the costs of not complying with the recommended behaviors? The former approach is called "gain framing," and the latter is "loss framing." The best answer to this question is "it depends."

The limited research in this area has targeted public health appeals, and indicates that gain framing works best for <u>prevention</u> behaviors, whereas loss framing seems to be more influential for messages intended to motivate <u>detection</u> behaviors.

More specifically, audiences were more likely to use sunscreen consistently when the

fear appeal focused on positive consequences to achieve with this prevention behavior; but women were more likely to perform regular breast self-examination or obtain a yearly mammography screening when the health message emphasized the possible negative consequences of not following the recommended detection behaviors.

How does this research translate to the design of messages for occupational safety? Generalizing the public health research to safety, we might presume that attempts to motivate such prevention behaviors as wearing PPE, locking out power sources, and using fall protection should stress the positive consequences achieved by compliance. But what detection behaviors in safety are analogous to the appeals for people to conduct regular self-examinations for cancerous tumors? It seems environmental and behavioral audits could be considered detection behaviors. Then the implication would be that loss framing would work better than gain framing when attempting to activate and maintain participation in an observation and feedback process, whether the detection behavior targets environmental hazards or at-risk behaviors.

These extrapolations from health to safety-related behaviors are strained, and it may be unwise to follow the prevention versus detection guideline without further research. At this point, my recommendation is to use both gain framing and loss framing when specifying the consequence opportunities available when safety-related instructions are followed. Just be sure to specify consequences – the lost opportunities when not complying and/or the gained opportunities when performing the recommended behavior. If you have an opportunity to compare the effects of gain framing versus loss framing for a safety-related appeal, please conduct such an evaluation and disseminate

your results. Such research is lacking, yet is critically important for improving the behavioral impact of safety-related instructions.

Influence Factors Beyond Message Content

The influence of a fear appeal is determined by more than its content. In fact, the same fear appeal can have markedly different effects, depending on the perceptions and person state of the message receiver. Let's briefly consider factors which researchers found to facilitate or inhibit the effectiveness of a fear appeal. The first factor is most important because it can be manipulated by the message sender.

Are the Recipients Volunteers?

There is convincing evidence that volunteers respond differently to fear appeals than nonvolunteers. People who feel compelled to listen to a safety or health message (as when involuntarily attending a safety class or watching a TV commercial) are much less affected by high fear messages than people who perceive they had some choice in the situation. Researchers theorize that some people who feel forced to listen to a safety message actively refuse to follow the recommendations in order to regain personal freedom perceived lost by the lack of volition in hearing the message.

It's important to realize that the distinction between feeling like a volunteer versus a non-volunteer recipient of a safety message can be subtle. For example, a safety leader who uses a strong fear appeal may or may not get compliance depending on who initiated the conversation. If the employee asks for advice, personal choice is evident and a fear appeal is likely to work. But the safety professional who comes on strong to an audience who feels required or obliged to listen may cause reactionary resistance to comply with the recommendations.

How Old is the Audience?

Research has demonstrated what seems like common sense. Fear appeals are more effective for older audiences. Perceived vulnerability to health and safety threats increase directly with age. Younger people generally feel that unintentional injury, death, and disease happen to elders or perhaps to other younger people. In other words, the belief that "it will never happen to me" is strongest among the youth.

This age factor is one reason televised public service announcements using fear appeals to reduce drug or alcohol abuse are not very influential. They target young people who have perceptions of invulnerability and thus are unlikely to be affected by a fear appeal.

How Anxious is the Audience?

Some people are naturally more tense or generally nervous than others, as assessed by psychological measures of trait anxiety. People scoring high on these anxiety scales are no more influenced by high fear than low fear appeals. In contrast, those who are less "anxious by nature" are more persuaded by high than low fear messages.

This distinction is not very practical, however, since we can't readily screen an audience for trait anxiety and then customize a health or safety message accordingly. Instead, assume the high fear appeal will usually work best because most people do not possess severe amounts of trait anxiety. Just realize that those relatively few who are generally anxious may not respond favorably to a high fear message.

Is the Audience Ready to Change?

This factor is also not very functional from the perspective of designing fear appeals for the masses. However, it does explain why some safety and health messages fall on deaf ears. Specifically, substantial research has shown that receptivity to a message advocating behavior change depends upon an individual's stage of readiness for change. Five stages have been identified: 1) precontemplation, 2) contemplation, 3) preparation, 4) action, and 5) maintenance.

People at Stages 2 and 3 are most likely to be influenced by a fear appeal, because they've been considering the target behavior (contemplation stage) or have actively been getting themselves ready for the behavior change (preparation stage). The same message will have least influence on those who have never considered performing the target behavior (precontemplation stage). And for those individuals in Stages 4 and 5 (action and maintenance), the fear appeal cannot provoke behavior change, because these persons are already performing the desired response. However, for these individuals, the fear appeal could serve a useful supportive function, thus increasing the likelihood the target behavior will continue.

What is the Perceived Response Cost?

Response cost refers to the negative consequences associated with complying with a message recommendation. The physical discomfort and lost time associated with the behavior recommended in a safety message will certainly influence the amount of compliance. This factor can sometimes be overcome by anticipating its occurrence and designing the action component with response cost in mind. For example, the message could include strategies for making PPE more comfortable and convenient, or

it could explain how the amount of time and effort required to conduct a behavioral or environmental audit is less than one might think at first.

In Conclusion

Fear appeals have substantial persuasive potential. This article reviewed the ingredients of an effective fear appeal, including: a) a severe threat (to elicit the emotion of fear), b) evidence showing the audience is vulnerable to the threat, and c) a specific solution for removing the threat that is easy to perform (self-efficacy) and effective (response-efficacy).

Preventive behaviors apparently benefit most from gain framing or emphasizing the advantages of performing the target behavior, whereas detection behaviors (e.g., environmental and behavioral safety audits) are more influenced by loss framing or a focus on the disadvantages (or costs) of not following the message's advice.

A number of other factors were reviewed that determine the potency of a fear appeal which are not readily manipulated by the message producer, but should be considered when establishing the context of a safety message or deciding whether or not a fear appeal should be used. These factors include: a) the age of the audience, b) the audience's perception of choice regarding message reception, c) the natural anxiety level of the message recipient, d) an individual's stage of readiness for change, and e) the perceived amount of response cost linked to the action strategy.

My guess is many readers intuitively predicted the impact of the fear appeal factors, from the need to include a straightforward, convenient, relevant, and efficient solution to providing a voluntary context for receiving the message. Moreover, most readers probably anticipated correctly the role of the individual factors: age, trait

9

anxiety, and readiness to change. That's good, but don't get complacent. There are many individuals who don't understand these basic qualities of an effective safety or health message. They need your advice.

Consider, for example, the following famous and frequently aired public service announcement used not too long ago to scare people away from using illegal drugs. The fear appeal showed an egg, a frying pan, and then the egg frying in the pan. The voice-over message was: "This is your brain. This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?"

Someone actually thought that fear approach would work, and they convinced others to spend time and money to show it over and over. Yet the threat, self-efficacy, response-efficacy, and vulnerability aspects of this message are nonexistent or too confusing to influence behavior. It's no wonder a fried egg and two strips of bacon have been printed on popular t-shirts and posters, along with the statement, "This is your brain with a side of bacon."

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