

# **The Do's and Don'ts of COVID-19 vaccine communications**

**A practitioner's guide to the principles  
of COVID-19 vaccine communications**



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# How we approached this work



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## Our process included



Identifying leading scholars in vaccine hesitancy



Five in-depth conversations with 16 scholars over five days



Extracting eight core principles, reviewed with scholars



Testing principles through a survey in the UK,  
Germany, France and the US



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# Getting to herd immunity



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# It all starts with trust



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# 8 principles for COVID-19 vaccine communications



Worldviews



Timing



Messengers



Narratives



Relationships



Social Norms



Emotions



Motivations



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**PRINCIPLE 1:**

**Work within worldviews,  
identities and moral values**



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# Worldviews:

Are a collection of stories and expectations of the world around us.

Guide how people think the world works.

Exist along a continuum.

Identifying the worldview of a community is important to identify messages and solutions that will resonate, and to avoid those that will lead to information avoidance or perceived threat.



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# Identities:

Are the groups we see ourselves belonging to.

We self-select them.

People within identity groups share beliefs and norms.

We are unlikely to engage in behavior that separates us from the groups we identify with.



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*“What's going to be compelling for some audiences is what resonates with their personal values. So for those who are rugged individuals, it could be about the freedom to go back to work as quickly as possible, and the freedom to go back and congregare at your place of worship as soon as possible. And the freedom to move about on your own in your community on your own time. So it's all about that sense of individual agency, but for others, it may be about responsibility to community and family and being a good parent, a good daughter or son to protect an elderly immunocompromised parent.”*

**-Monica Schoch-Spana, Ph.D.**

**Medical anthropologist and Senior Scholar, Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security**



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# Moral values:

Guide people's decision-making.

Serve as basis for quick judgements of good or bad.

Are the underlying reason for different motivations across different cultures and community.



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# Breakdown of motivations by value

Conservative Value	Motivation
In-group loyalty	Emphasis on loyalty or betrayal to his or her group. Emphasis on protecting the group, even above their own interests.
Respect for authority	Emphasis on respect for tradition and hierarchy and responsibility to fulfill duties of his or her role within society.
Purity/Sanctity	Identifying something as unnatural or disgusting, or violating standards of purity and decency. Emphasis on acting in a virtuous way.

Liberal Value	Motivation
Protection from harm	Emphasis on protecting someone from harm, suffering, emotional distress, violence. Care for the weak and vulnerable.
Fairness	Emphasis on equality and justice, i.e., people treated differently than others or someone denied his or her rights.



# Recommendations

## Work within worldviews, identity and moral values



Examine the worldviews, identities and moral values of your target communities and discuss vaccines in the context of what you know is **most important to them**.



As you apply the other principles in this guide, start with an understanding of the worldviews, identities and moral values of those whose behavior you're working to shift.



**Build clear calls to action that resonate** with the moral values, worldviews and identities of those whose mindsets you hope to shift.



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**PRINCIPLE 2:**

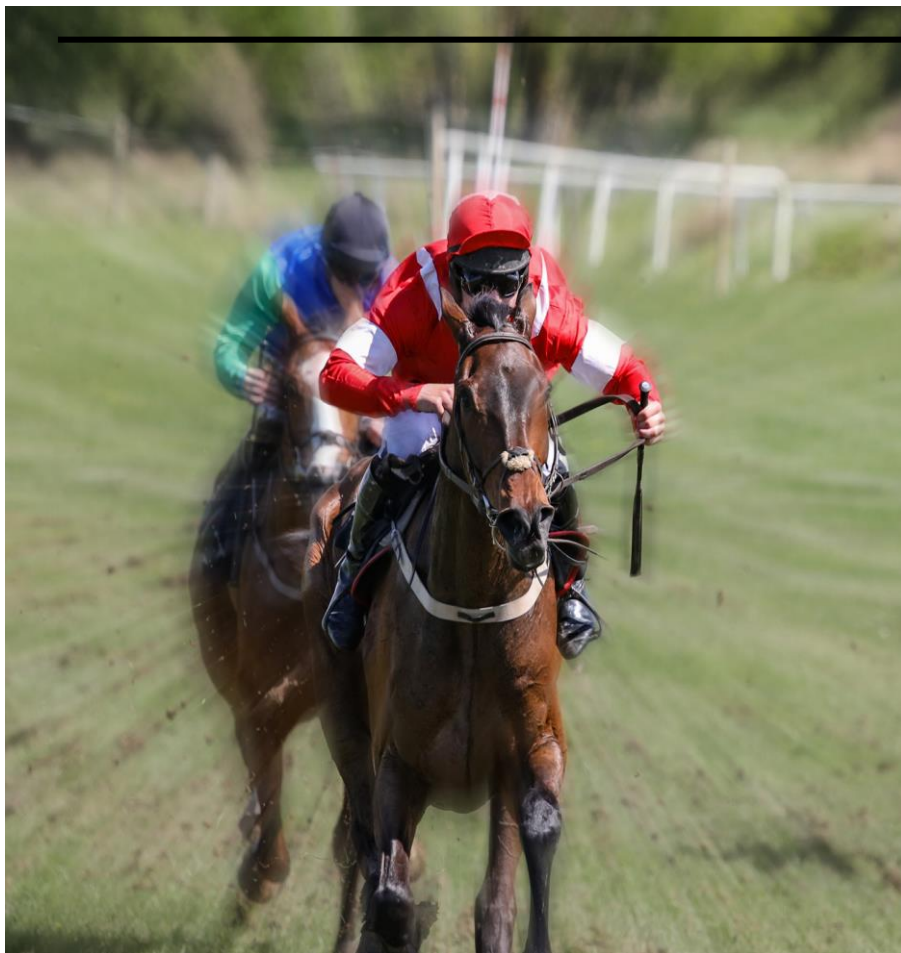
**Use timing to your advantage**



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## Be first: why and how



People trust what they hear first



Inoculation theory works like vaccines do



Consistency counts



Different messengers need same message



Encourages critical thinking



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# Recommendations

## Use timing to your advantage



Identify content areas where you have an opportunity to “get there first” and inoculate people with effective messages that resonate with their worldview.



Consider what else is happening at the same time and how that might affect how much people trust your message.



Repeat. While being first with a message is important, it’s also important that people continue to hear the same message from a variety of sources.



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**PRINCIPLE 3:**

**Use the right messengers**



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# Messengers

Effective messengers are trusted leaders  
and community experts

We trust our in-group over our out-group

Apolitical sources are crucial

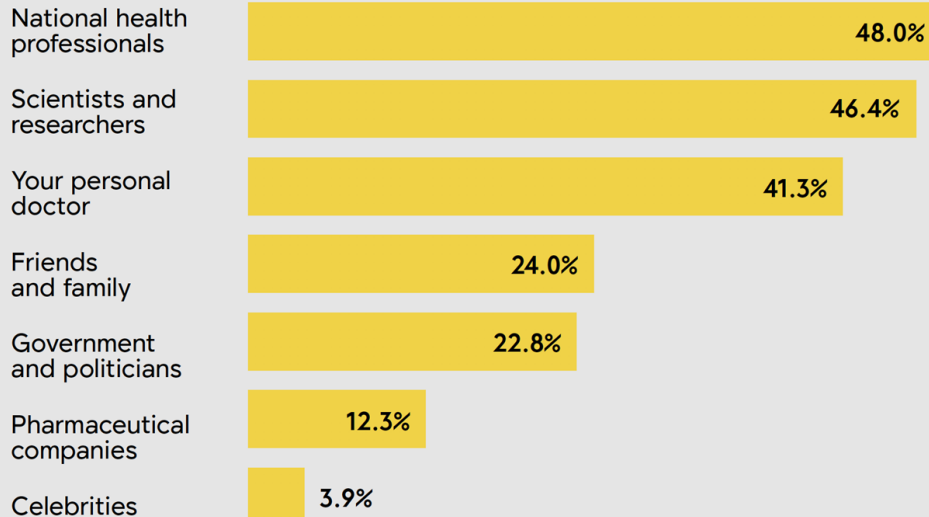


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# During the COVID-19 pandemic, who do you get reliable health advice from?

Scientists and health professionals are the most trusted sources of advice during the pandemic.

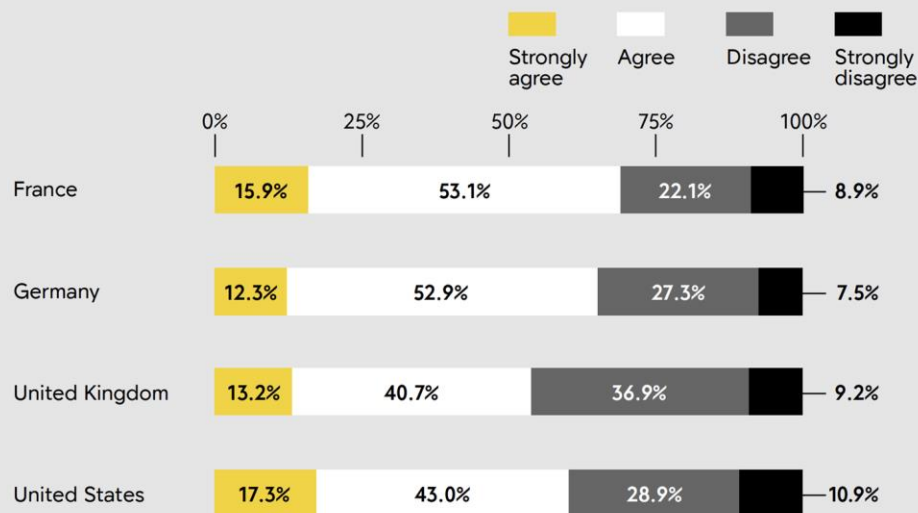


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# Most people want to receive information on a COVID-19 vaccine from people in their community

Across the four countries, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would prefer to get information on a vaccine from people in their community rather than distant experts. French and German respondents were even more likely to want information from their communities.



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# Recommendations

## Use the right messengers



Understand which sources of information trusted messengers are citing within the communities you are trying to reach.



Recognize that there are **trusted messengers in both offline and digital communities**. It's important to listen to both to identify trusted individuals who can help you create and share messages that will be trusted by a community.



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**PRINCIPLE 4:**

**Make your content concrete,  
supply a narrative and provide value**



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**Information alone  
is not enough**



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# Creating content

Concrete language avoids ambiguity

Avoid abstraction

Definitions increase shared understanding

Narratives help sensemaking

Provide value

Three messages that have been used effectively by vaccine-hesitant communities: **regret, choice and control.**

Scholars suggest these might be flipped to reduce vaccine hesitancy.



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# Recommendations

**Content should be concrete, supply a narrative and provide value**



Overcome abstraction with messages that situate the importance in terms of local threat, likelihood, timeliness, and possible harm to people like you.



Try flipping the themes of choice, regret and control and frame them in a positive way to increase vaccine uptake.



Identify messages that are consistent even as knowledge evolves—like the process for creating a vaccine.



Build a narrative. Situate facts within stories of individuals reclaiming control of their lives to make them believable and relatable.



Use definitions and details rather than acronyms and jargon.



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**PRINCIPLE 5:**

**Recognize that communities have  
different relationships with vaccination**



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# Cultural differences

“Loose” vs “tight” societies

Feelings toward authority

Perceived politicization

Language, metaphor, messages, and imagery look different and have different salience within different societies.



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# Local outreach



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# Recommendations

Recognize that communities have different relationships with vaccinations



Understand whether the communities in which you are communicating are “tight” or “loose.”



Take into account the relationship people in your community have with authority and frame the message accordingly.



Where possible, **get deeply immersed** in both online and geographic communities to understand their specific fears and concerns.



Recognize that particular communities have significant and **valid reasons to be fearful** of new medical interventions and address these transparently.



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**PRINCIPLE 6:**

**Change social norms  
to help gain acceptance**



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# Social norms approach



Identify social influencers



Highlight bright spots



Shift beliefs with new norms



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A photograph of a crowded bar or pub. The ceiling is high with exposed wooden beams and various flags hanging from it, including the American flag and a St. Andrew's cross. A large yellow rectangular box is superimposed over the center of the image, containing the text "Norms campaigns" in a bold, black, serif font. In the background, a sign for "Allato Brewing Co." is visible, along with a digital menu board. The foreground shows the backs and profiles of several people sitting at a bar or table, engaged in conversation.

# Norms campaigns



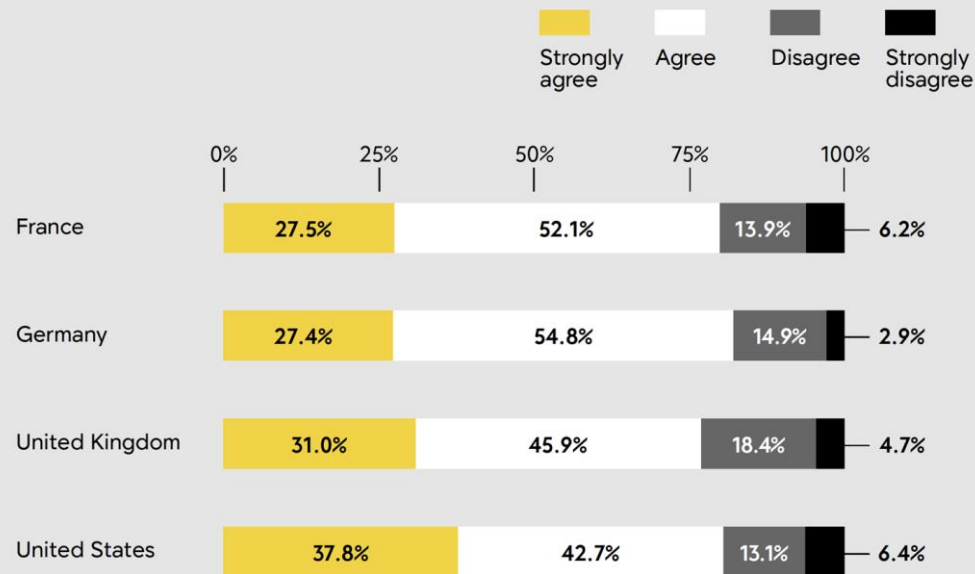
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# Most people agreed that a COVID-19 vaccine should not be mandatory

Reflecting strong social norms about personal choice, majorities across all four countries agreed or strongly agreed that people should have a personal choice as to whether to take a COVID-19 vaccine.



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# Recommendations

Change social norms to help gain acceptance



Shift norms of your identified community with messages and stories that highlight people within their social network who are getting the vaccine, not those who aren't.



Work with influencers to shift these perceptions.



If you're using experts to communicate on the topic, move away from the information deficit model to science-informed frameworks like this one.



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**PRINCIPLE 7:**

**Evoke the right emotions**



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# Emotions

Invoke specific behaviors

Should be chosen intentionally

Fear can elicit mixed emotions, shame is likely to make people obscure harmful behaviors

Use pleasant emotions like pride, joy, and parental love in place of unpleasant ones like shame and fear.



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*"We don't want to feel the shame, but changing the behavior is not necessarily the easiest thing to do. . . This is something that's been on my mind a lot with university responses to students about shaming them around various behaviors. What you're asking them to do is lie to you on these daily checks, etc. It's not actually getting them to stop doing those behaviors. So that's something I want to be cautious about, is shame and stigma. Those appeals do not work in the way people think they do. It gets people to lie to you, and so we shouldn't do that."*

**-Neil Lewis, Jr., Ph.D.**

**Assistant Professor at the Department of Communications, Cornell University**



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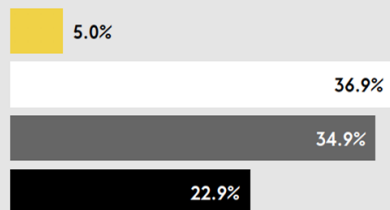


## A significant number of vaccine hesitant people responded positively to a hopeful message

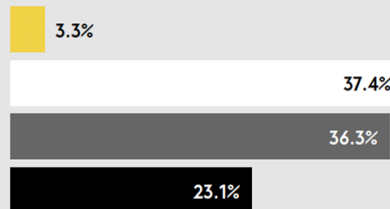
41% of vaccine hesitant individuals agreed or strongly agreed a COVID-19 vaccine was the "best chance" we have of ending the pandemic.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

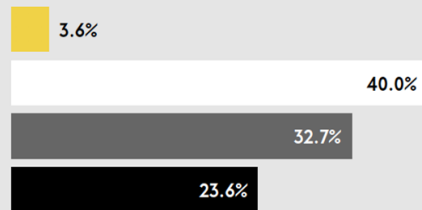
France



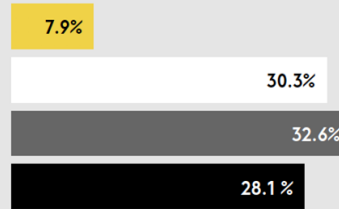
Germany



United Kingdom



United States



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# Recommendations

## Evoked the right emotions



Avoid using shame, fear or sadness in calls to action. We are likely to tune out messages that use sadness or shame so we can retain our positive sense of self, and fear messages can be immobilizing.



Tap into hope, pride and parental love to motivate people to act and affirm their positive sense of self.



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**PRINCIPLE 8:**

**Our perceptions of the motivations  
of the messenger matter**



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# Recommendations

Our perceptions of the motivations of the messenger matter, as do our own motivations



Be transparent about the motivations of the messenger.



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# 8 principles for COVID-19 vaccine communications



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*“And so you could create a whole new category of society that's vaccine hesitant who wouldn't otherwise be, if this is miscommunicated.”*

**-Jay Van Bavel, Ph.D.**

**Associate Professor of Psychology & Neural Science, New York University;  
affiliate at the Stern School of Business in Management and Organizations;  
Director of the Social Identity & Morality Lab.**



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# Guide to COVID-19 vaccine communications

<https://covid19vaccinescommunicationprinciples.org/>



- Please share this resource
- Link to it from your website or social accounts
- Implement the recommendations into your communications strategy

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achristiano@jou.ufl.edu



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What's next

Questions and observations?