

New Tools for Public Health

Public health librarian Laura Larsson has compiled a guide to new tools. View her online resource at www.nwpublichealth.org

Public health professionals are constantly needing to share information and engage others. We need to give effective presentations, run meetings, and work with the professional media, not to mention the importance of communicating with legislators, the public, and the health care community. How do we use modern communications technologies to be more effective?

What means should be used to reach diverse audiences?

The need	e-mail, listservs	teleconference, Web conference	Web site	blogs, Twitter	Facebook, MySpace
information distribution	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
asynchronous interaction	✓		✓	✓	✓
bits of information & interaction	✓			✓	✓
thoughtful, not immediate, discussion	✓		✓		

With so many new ways of reaching different audiences, it's easy to confuse the intention of different means; it's also easy to try to do too much. Although many of these new tools of communication are "free,"

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they do consume personnel time and, therefore, resources. It's important to consider how you are going to use each tool, how frequently, and what this might mean in terms of time consumption. It's also important to realize that not all methods are functional for every organizational structure.

One common discussion revolving around social media, like Twitter and Facebook, regards timeliness.

These are tremendous tools for dissemination of short bits of information, but the question becomes: how frequently do you have little bits of information to disseminate? And, in the case of something like Facebook, how quickly would you respond?

Much of "social media" involves two-way communication. Sure, they disseminate, but they also make organizations more accessible by encouraging comments and questions. Most of us would agree that increasing our accessibility is a positive outcome, but we want to make sure that we maximize that accessibility instead of being trapped by it.

It's important to have a plan in place to respond. Slow or incorrect responses will weaken our connection rather than strengthen it. The informal and constant nature of the communication poses unique public health challenges. ■