On Message

Media Matters in the Classroom

By Alla Katsnelson
Remember Vince and Larry, the crash test dummies? They made their debut in 1985, in print, radio, and television ads nationwide that promoted the use of seat belts. “You can learn a lot from a dummy,” the duo told anyone who would listen. And a lot of people did: In the first year of the campaign, seat belt use almost doubled, jumping from 23 percent to 39 percent in a 19-city survey. (Today, mandatory seat belt laws have brought that number up to about 85 percent.)

In the late ’90s, another public health campaign became a cultural touchstone when Hollywood joined forces with researchers to promote the concept of the “designated driver” by planting it in shows running on prime-time television. In four years, drunken driving fatalities dropped by 25 percent.

These are just two examples of public health messages that successfully reached their intended audiences. Getting the message out—through a city-wide campaign promoting exercise, for example, or a news story about a study on asthma and pollution—is a key part of efforts to translate public health research into strategies that improve people’s well-being. Yet in this age of information overload, public health researchers often are ill-equipped to engage with people beyond academia’s ivory tower.

“It’s very daunting for a lot of scientists to talk publicly about their work, for fear peers will think they’re ‘dumbing down’ the science,” says health journalist and editor Jordan Lite, MPH ’13, who teaches a weeklong course, Communicating Public Health in the Media, for the Epidemiology and Public Health Summer Institute at Columbia. “But it’s very important for students to get the reminder that public health affects real people and that not everyone is automatically going to understand the work they do.”

The Mailman School has placed a premium on public outreach since its founding in 1921 through the bequest of Joseph DeLamar, a wealthy Dutch-born sea captain whose will directed his beneficiaries to disseminate their research findings “by popular publications, public lectures, and other appropriate methods” so that the fruits of their labors could benefit everyone. Efforts on this front have only intensified in recent years. Several initiatives launched as part of the School’s 2012 curriculum redesign integrate communication training early in the master of public health program; additional opportunities
are available to students throughout the School. In May, Dean Linda P. Fried, MD, MPH, announced plans to launch the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion—to pursue health communication science across the life course—established with a $6 million gift from Sid and Helaine Lerner (see page 16).

“Ultimately, we can do all the science we want, but public health is about the translation of the science,” says Matthew S. Perzanowski, MPH, PhD, an associate professor of Environmental Health Sciences. “One of the most important things that a master’s in public health graduate should be able to do is take divergent primary research, review it, and synthesize it—that is, come up with a critical analysis of the scientific evidence to date—and then translate that to a lay audience through the media, community organizations, or directly.”

This past spring, Perzanowski began co-teaching a module on communication in Integrating Science and Practice, a foundational two-semester course required for all first-year MPH students. Developed by Perzanowski and Tim Paul, a Mailman School science editor and associate director for strategic communications, the module explores a series of case studies, such as the debate that led to New York City’s ban on trans fats in 2006 and the city’s response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Students write a press release about a public health decision made by the city, then hold a mock press conference based on the release, with the rest of the class simulating a corps of reporters from such media outlets as The New York Times, BuzzFeed, and Al Jazeera America. Says Perzanowski: “They really had to stand and defend the decisions they had made.”

Students also see what happens when messaging stumbles. In one of the press conferences, on evacuation efforts in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, a student playing the part of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg declined to detail how evacuation efforts would proceed. “Mayor says he is spearheading efforts but doesn’t provide specifics,” read a “reporter” student’s mock headline. “We couldn’t have planted a better experience,” says Perzanowski, who has begun integrating concepts from the module into the curriculum in his own department. This year, master’s students in the capstone course for Environmental Health Sciences were asked to simulate presentations targeted to either a community health group or a grade 12 science class. “In the end,” says Perzanowski, “what we were trying to show them is how difficult it is to get across a message, and then equip them with the tools to communicate that message—even when it is complicated.”

In September 2012, the Department of Epidemiology launched the 2x2 project to give students real-world training in tactics for timely and effective communication about emerging public health science. “We were all circling around the idea that we need to do something like this because nothing comparable exists,” says Dana March, MPH ’03, PhD ’10, the project’s editor-in-chief and an assistant professor of Epidemiology. “I think a number of prospective students are really drawn to the School because of it.”

Run like an online magazine, the 2x2 project gives four fellows hands-on experience applying the lessons they and their classmates covered in Lite’s Communicating Public Health in the Media course. “One thing I emphasize,” says Lite, “is that people who do journalism and people who do public health have a shared social justice mission to promote an informed public.” Beyond
Mondays Maven

As a Boy Scout during World War II, Sid Lerner heard the newscasts and saw the posters in which President Franklin D. Roosevelt exhorted the country to avoid eating meat one day each week to conserve it for the troops. As a young professional in the booming postwar economy, Lerner landed the proverbial $45-a-week mailroom job at an advertising agency. It was 1955: Television was just 8 years old, and a generation of would-be artists was thronging to the medium with wild ideas for selling anything and everything that the era’s consumer could possibly want.

Lerner steadily worked his way up the ranks, writing ads for cigars, perfume, bras, and cosmetics. Then in the mid-’60s, he hit the big time—managing the “Don’t Squeeze the Charmin” campaign featuring George Whipple, a fictional grocery store manager who for two decades scolded customers for fondling a brand of toilet tissue made by Procter & Gamble.

By the early 2000s, Lerner was semiretired and doing pro bono work. He had just begun taking Lipitor when he attended a scientific conference about fat and cholesterol. Americans eat about 15 percent more meat than they need, said a presenter. Lerner’s inner adman kicked in, as did his childhood memory of FDR’s exhortation. He would stage a comeback for the meatless day, pitched with an alliterative twist: Meatless Monday.

Critics warned that “meatless” would turn people off, suggesting “Healthy Monday” instead. “I said, ‘Well that’s great,’” Lerner recalls, “but I can’t sell it; it’s too intangible, doesn’t say what we want people to do.” So he stuck to his guns.

Twelve years later, Lerner’s campaign has spread to 36 countries. “Turkey, Israel, and Iran all agree on one thing: Meatless Monday,” he says. The campaign’s success has proved the power of shining advertising’s spotlight on public health and Lerner’s nonprofit, The Monday Campaigns, now champions a range of health-promoting behaviors.

As a campaign partner, the Mailman School helped launch Man Up Monday, which encourages young men to get tested for STIs, and Kids Cook Monday, to promote weekly family dinners. “We’re trying to augment the DNA of the public health community with promotion-minded people,” says Lerner, a member of the Mailman School’s Board of Overseers, “so that research can be translated to the public in a meaningful way.”
philosophy, she adds a heavy dose of mechanics—what makes news, how to pitch a story, how to translate scientific jargon into accessible language, and how to effectively use social media. Says Lite: “The way that the sausage is made in the newsroom is very eye-opening to them.”

Fellows spend about 15 to 20 hours a week writing longform journalism for the2x2project.org, which aims to engage audiences beyond the Mailman School in issues relating to public health. (Fellows receive a $7,500 stipend for the year.) March, who worked briefly in advertising before embarking on a public health career, is quick to explain that the project’s goal is not to provide health education. The site, which gets about 83,000 visitors annually, presents an eclectic mix of topics—from gun violence to gambling addiction—informed by current events. “We cover certain issues that are overtly public health issues, but we also draw out the public health relevance of issues that aren’t traditionally viewed that way,” says March. “I think we have a responsibility of making it clear that public health issues are everywhere.”

Through weekly idea lab meetings, fellows work on story ideas with intensive coaching from March and her team: Josh Brooks, MPH ’12, a member of the project’s first cohort who stayed on as a senior fellow, and journalist Elaine Meyer, the associate director of communications in Epidemiology. Fellows are encouraged to stretch themselves as they develop their voices and select topics. “I came into it thinking I would want to write about all the things I was doing research on,” says former 2x2 fellow Christopher Tait, MPH ’14, a doctoral student at the University of Toronto. “But I also saw it as a chance to delve into areas I normally wouldn’t touch upon.” One of the pieces he’s proudest of focused on suicide prevention—a topic far afield from his scholarship developing epidemiological models for chronic diseases. Coincidentally, the connection Tait made with a scientist he interviewed for the story was later instrumental in his PhD application process. “One of the things we didn’t anticipate is that it would be an enormous opportunity for people to network,” says March. “It’s played out for every single one of the fellows in very particular ways.”

The2x2project also takes a very active approach to social media. Fellows take weeklong rotations staffing the project’s Twitter feed and Facebook page, making sure not just to promote their own work but to add to the online conversation. In November, the crew headed to Boston to live-tweet the 2013 American Public Health Association annual meeting, garnering hundreds of new followers for the2x2project. That was great for the website, which March hopes to expand further this year, and it was also great for the students. Whether through a Twitter account, an op-ed for a newspaper, a presentation to a community group, or a policy brief that aims to describe a health strategy to public officials, Mailman School graduates will increasingly be called upon to communicate with the public. “Whether I’m talking to scientists who know my field or to a lay audience,” says Tait, “I think I’m now just a much more effective communicator.”

---

**ALLA KATSNELSON** writes about issues in biological research, health, and science policy for Nature, Scientific American, and The Guardian.