

Developing Extension Material for Audiences with Low Literacy Rates

From: Zimmerman, M., Newton, N., Frumin, L. and Wittet, S. (1996) Developing Health and Family Planning Materials for Low-Literate Audiences: A Guide. Washington D.C., Program for Appropriate Health Technology, pp. 7-9.

In most parts of the world, village poultry owners have low literacy rates. This presents a challenge to those preparing extension materials for such a target audience. Useful guidelines can be found in the manual entitled "Developing Health and Family Planning Materials for Low-Literate Audiences: A Guide." Although the examples used in the manual deal with human health issues, the methodologies presented apply equally well to the communication of animal health and production issues. The manual was developed by the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) and is available free to developing country organisations or individuals. All others may order copies prepaid by USD bank cheque or money order. For more information please write to:

Communication Department
PATH
1990 M Street, N.W., Suite 700
Washington, D.C., 20036, USA
Fax: +1-202-4571466; E-mail: info@path-dc.org

The introductory section of the manual is given below.

Developing Health and Family Planning Materials for Low-Literate Audiences: A Guide

1. Introduction

Twenty-three percent of the world's adults cannot read or write. This proportion is even higher in developing countries. Over half of the developing world's adult population is illiterate; there are African countries in which over three-quarters of the men and women cannot read or write. But low-literate populations are not confined to the developing world: in the United States it is estimated that one out of every five American adults has reading skills below the fifth grade level.

Women currently comprise 64 % of the world's illiterate population, and while the number of illiterate males is dropping, the number of illiterate females continues to grow. Research has shown that high national fertility rates and low life expectancies at birth are both associated with high rates of female illiteracy.

In terms of sheer numbers, the illiterate population of the developing countries is actually rising, while the number in most developed countries is dropping. It is often precisely this group that is most in need of information on health care, agriculture, sanitation, water management, nutrition and other aspects of development. The inverse relationship between female literacy and infant mortality reinforces the need to develop informational materials designed specifically for low-literate groups.

Mass media, such as radio and television, have been successfully used in some areas. Traditional folk media, including puppet shows, theatre and songs are also valuable. However, while these techniques can augment and reinforce interpersonal communication, none of them can replace the interactive learning possibilities afforded by face-to-face communication. Carefully designed print materials can be used to support the interaction between health workers and clients; hence, these materials may be called "support materials."

This manual offers guidelines for developing health and family planning support materials for illiterate and low-literate groups worldwide. Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) uses materials development techniques which rely heavily on the involvement of the audience for whom the materials are intended (the target audience). Qualitative research techniques, such as focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews, can be used to assess the knowledge, attitudes and practices of a target audience with respect to a particular health or family planning product or behavior.

As informational materials are prepared – from the initial identification of need through the development of messages and the production of the piece itself – repeated interaction with representatives of the target audience is undertaken to ensure that the materials produced are accurate, well understood and responsive to the audience's needs and concerns. Fieldworkers and program managers should also be included in the materials development process to ensure that the final product meets their criteria and to give them a sense of "ownership" of the materials, thus increasing the likelihood that they will use the materials and will encourage others to do so.

There are many advantages to using print materials in the information, education and communication (IEC) components of health and family planning programs. Print materials:

- Come in many forms, such as booklets, package inserts, posters, fliers, coloring books, comic books and flip charts.
- Are easy to store and can be used without any special equipment.

- Are an excellent tool to reinforce messages presented verbally during interpersonal contacts.
- Can be used as reference materials should the health provider or client forget any important messages.
- Provide a means for transmitting standardized information to an audience beyond the initial recipient, since clients often share their print materials with friends, relatives or neighbors.
- Are usually appropriate for local production and can be tailored for specific audiences.
- Improve user comprehension. A study in Bangladesh found that one month after receiving pictorial contraceptive instruction booklets, 83 % of the recipients still remembered when to start taking the pill, as opposed to 16 % of the group who had received only verbal instructions.
- Can counteract rumors, reduce fears of possible side effects and reassure acceptors that health and family planning methods or other health technologies are effective and safe.
- May serve as a motivator for those who wish to improve their literacy skills.

This manual is designed to guide the reader step-by-step through the process of developing health and family planning print material for low-literate adults. The same materials development techniques can be used to develop radio spots, videos or theatre programs.

Each section of this Guide discusses a separate step in the materials development process.

“Target Audiences” explains how to profile audiences and determine their specific needs.

“Project Planning” offers tips on formulating work plans to allocate time and financial resources.

“Audience Research” describes methods to derive information from the target audience to assess and better understand its needs and concerns, while

“Message Development” details the process of using data from FGDs and audience research to develop messages and communicate them pictorially in a clear, sequential manner.

“Guidelines for Materials Production” provides tips that can be helpful when preparing materials for low-literate groups.

“Pretesting and Revision” explains ways to ensure that the intended messages are conveyed and that the materials are acceptable to the target audience.

“Printing” raises issues to consider during the production stage of the materials development process.

“Distribution and Training” describes how to disseminate the materials and train health workers to use them effectively with their clients.

“Evaluation” describes methods to examine the field use of the materials and their impact on the intended target audience.

