

About Missouri Foundation for Health's COVID Vaccine Messaging Campaign

In late 2020, as scientists were racing to develop vaccines during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation and a climate of distrust and divisiveness in the US were fueling public concerns about the safety and effectiveness of potential vaccines. Missouri Foundation for Health saw the need for a broad communications campaign to address COVID-19 vaccine concerns. **From May 2021 through June 2022, MFH led a COVID-19 vaccine messaging campaign informed by public opinion research. The campaign aimed to provide all Missourians, and especially communities experiencing inequities in health outcomes, with the information necessary to make the best decisions for themselves and their families.**

MFH built its understanding of the statewide context for this work by speaking with health departments across Missouri and by funding a research firm to facilitate a vaccine messaging study. Then, MFH partnered with Betty&Smith, a communications firm, to support the development and implementation of a messaging campaign with statewide and community-specific elements.¹ MFH also engaged 14 community-based organizations throughout Missouri to serve as local community messengers, supplying them with grants, communications tools, and technical assistance.

Learning from the Vaccine Messaging Campaign

In late 2021, MFH partnered with Engage R+D, a research consulting firm, to learn from this campaign. The learning effort told the story of the campaign and lessons that it offers about messaging campaigns and working in the context of a pandemic and divisive political environment. The learning effort focused on three goals (see box to the right). To address these goals, Engage R+D conducted 16 retrospective interviews with grantees, MFH staff, and communications partners; synthesized secondary data on COVID-19 and vaccines; scanned local news sources to understand the policy context; and reviewed statistical reports produced by the communications partner over the course of the initiative.

This summary highlights considerations for **philanthropic organizations**, **communications teams**, and **community-based organizations** looking to support or implement similar campaigns.

Learning Goals

- Document the **communications approach**, how real-time learning impacted the strategy, and how MFH leveraged communications as a changemaking tool.
- **Understand grantees' work**, including the communications approaches they used, how they tailored messages to meet community needs, and how they learned from each other to support the work.
- Track how the **COVID-19 landscape and related policy context** in Missouri evolved and impacted the initiative.

¹ MFH engaged PerryUndem to conduct the messaging research and Betty&Smith to support the communications work.

What Happened

Campaign Overview

The messaging campaign relied on focus group research, storytelling, and an iterative approach to sharing COVID-19 vaccine information from spring 2021 through spring 2022. The research identified key messages that would resonate with different audiences, including “getting back to normal,” “protecting self and loved ones,” and “protecting the community.” Through focus groups, MFH’s research firm partner also identified trusted messengers for COVID-19 vaccine information, including doctors and health officials, religious leaders, and friends and family.

“We wanted to give people the best information, factual information. And we used stories to do that because we wanted to humanize it.”

- MFH staff member

Overview of Vaccine Messaging Research and Campaign Phases



COVID-19 Vaccine Messaging Research	Winter 2020-21
The team conducted 12 focus groups with community members across different races, ethnicities, ages, locations, and political ideologies in Missouri to understand their perceptions about COVID-19, vaccines, and messages about getting vaccinated.	<p>Key Messages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Get back to normal - Protect myself and my loved ones - Protect my community <p>Trusted Messengers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Doctors - Health officials - Church leaders - People I know

COVID-19 Vaccine Messaging Campaign Phases

#IGotIt Campaign	Spring 2021
Building on Missourians’ desire to get back to normal, the team designed an inclusive, non-judgmental campaign that acknowledged questions people had about the COVID-19 vaccines while emphasizing that vaccination is the best way for Missouri to get back to normal . These messages aired on TV, radio, and digital ads as well as through customizable toolkits, flyers, and social media material shared by community-based partners .	

#KidsDocsFightCOVID Campaign	Fall 2021
As pediatric COVID-19 cases rose in August 2021, the team worked with pediatricians to share the importance of getting vaccinated to protect children . Physicians around Missouri were featured in 60-second radio ads and social media videos in both local and statewide markets, accompanied by digital toolkits for hospital systems and physician networks. These spots also garnered media attention and were featured in news stories from the <i>St. Louis American</i> to <i>Newsweek</i> .	

#SpreadLoveNotCOVID Campaign	Winter 2021
As the 2021 holiday season approached, community-based partners were interested in sharing clear, concise messaging around how to celebrate safely . In response, the team produced a packet of materials with messages about feeling good about gathering, finding a safer way to celebrate, and spreading love, not COVID.	

#ThisIsLongCOVID Campaign	February 2022
To highlight the risks and long-term effects of COVID-19 , the team worked with people who had long COVID to tell compelling personal stories and share information through radio ads, digital videos, and outreach to news outlets. The campaign also worked with social media influencers who helped the campaign reach beyond traditional audiences. Community-based partners were provided with materials to share in their communities.	

Fertility and Pregnancy Campaign	Spring 2022
In response to widespread myths about vaccine-related infertility, the team worked with social media influencers across Missouri to share their personal stories along with credible, factual information about getting vaccinated. This campaign highlighted that the best way to protect your family is to get vaccinated .	

Advertising, Earned Media, and Influencer Strategies

The vaccine messaging campaign relied in part on broadly reaching digital, TV, and radio ads, along with earned media such as coverage of the campaign by news outlets. The team used tailored messages to deliver timely and accurate education about vaccines, while also highlighting stories and lived experiences of real Missourians. In addition, the team tapped into a trusted source of information by working with social media influencers — people with a substantial following on social media platforms — popular with audiences of interest for vaccine messaging.

Community-Based Outreach

Using the campaign materials, community-based grantee organizations engaged in targeted on-the-ground outreach to disparately impacted groups. Grantees commonly reported that racial equity was a key factor in driving or informing their outreach efforts, given that Black people and other people of color bore outsized impacts of the pandemic. As one commented, “Black people and other people of color disproportionately did not fare well in COVID-19 with deaths. It meant that in doing this work, we had to be extra careful and speak to that.”

Misinformation and Divisive Context

As the communications team and community organizations strove to provide clear and accurate vaccination information, they were doing so in a highly politicized environment rife with misinformation. In this divisive context, it became more difficult to make messages heard and form successful partnerships. “Evangelical churches were hard to reach out to. They just weren’t agreeable with the vaccine, so that was a challenge,” a grantee remarked. Another noted that, similar to churches, businesses “just didn’t want to stir up the pot, so to say, about the vaccine because of controversy.”

“Politicized leadership around a public health crisis impaired everybody’s ability to do this work.”

- Grantee

Pandemic Effects on Community-Based Organizations

The pandemic posed unique challenges for community-based organizations doing the messaging work. Factors including disruptions to their staff capacity and ways of working, shifting health guidelines, and changing public attitudes about vaccination complicated efforts to expand their role as a trusted resource within their communities and deliver tailored, accurate, and timely information. A grantee pointed out a paradoxical situation, saying, “It’s just so tricky nowadays with not being able to actually meet in spaces because of the pandemic, when we’re trying to talk to people about getting the vaccines so we can end the pandemic.”

Insights on How to Structure a Messaging Campaign

Reflections by MFH and its partners yielded lessons about creating a messaging campaign and using advertising, earned media, and influencers to reach audiences.

Lessons for Creating a Messaging Campaign

- **Get to know your audiences.** Tested messages were crucial to informing the messaging campaign. The research from the focus groups and ongoing scans of news and social media informed strategies and messages that resonated with target audiences, allowing the **communications team** to prioritize limited resources as they developed communications tools and targeted messaging. **Philanthropic organizations** should consider opportunities to support research at the outset of a messaging project and throughout a campaign, especially as the context is evolving.
- **Offer empathy and understanding.** Based on their public opinion research, the **communications team** saw that Missourians were wary of the vaccine for a wide variety of reasons. They found that to open the door to empathy and understanding, it is important to avoid patronizing or dismissive messages and instead acknowledge questions and different reasons for concern. Messages can then provide responsive, fact-based answers and transparency.
- **Use simple messaging to cut through the noise.** The **communications team** observed that messaging around COVID-19 often felt confusing and overwhelming to navigate. To cut through the noise, they recommended sticking with simple, relatable messaging – in their case, for example, about people’s desires to stay safe, see relatives over the holidays, or protect children. As a member of the communications team explained, “We wanted to lean on simple, straightforward messaging about getting together safely.”
- **Stay nimble and reflect on the moment.** The **communications team** found that being adaptive was important as the COVID-19 landscape shifted and messages needed to rise above the latest misinformation and reflect current public sentiment. For example, spring 2021, a year into the pandemic, brought a strong public desire to return to normal life. By tying vaccination to safe reopening, the campaign’s messaging conveyed vaccination as the fastest route to resuming normal activities.

“We were nimble and very responsive to what was happening in the environment... I commend MFH on having that flexibility to move so quickly.”

- Betty&Smith staff member

Lessons for Using Advertising, Earned Media, and Influencers

- **Try multiple channels.** To reach more people, the **communications team** used multiple channels, including TV, radio, and digital advertising, to convey campaign messages and drive traffic to the [MOSTopsCOVID.com](https://www.mostopsCOVID.com) website for further information. Various channels offer different advantages and can reach broader audiences who may prefer one or another type of media. For example, digital channels allow for narrower ad targeting to particular demographics, while radio ads give time to build emotional connections and trust with listeners.
- **Facilitate earned media.** While media coverage is not guaranteed, **communications teams** can make it easy for reporters to cover a story about their campaign. For example, providing links to videos or websites, a well-written press release, and contact information for follow-up interviews is helpful to reporters. In addition, making pitches to weekly or monthly outlets, instead of daily publications, can avoid competition with breaking news.
- **Engage audiences on their turf.** **Communications teams** can work with social media influencers to reach audiences who already follow and relate to that messenger. Not only will the influencer be able to capture the attention of their community more reliably than an ad, they may also have greater ability to persuade that audience. A communications firm staff member noted, “They’re really powerful spokespeople. They’re reaching networks and audiences that MFH just may not be reaching.” In this messaging campaign, audiences reacted positively when influencers opened up about their own initial concerns about getting vaccinated. Many influencers also shared their personal motivations for getting vaccinated as well as the information that helped overcome any hesitancy.

Insights on Engaging the Community to Share Your Message

Themes from grantee experiences informed a range of lessons for community-based organizations implementing messaging work and for the philanthropic organizations and communications teams supporting that work.

Lessons for Community-Based Organizations Implementing Messaging Work

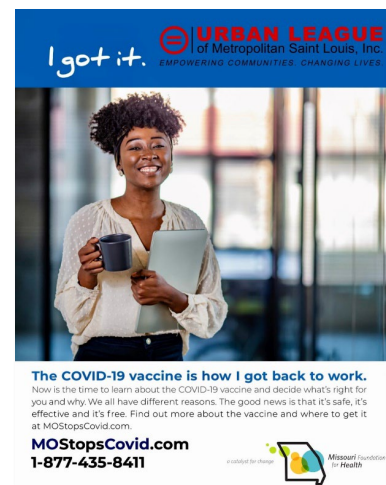
- **Build trust by addressing holistic needs.** Several aspects of the pandemic, including shifting guidance and misinformation from authority figures, served to undermine people's trust in the campaign's messages. **Community-based organizations** found success in pairing vaccine information with offers of other resources, using trusted messengers, providing human interaction, and talking through concerns. In addition, they emphasized the value of showing openness to different viewpoints and empowering people to make their own best decision. Grantees reflected that centering people as experts in their own lives is essential to respect and trust building.
- **Leverage partnerships.** Some **community-based organizations** partnered with other groups to help spread messages, open channels to coordinate or share resources, and facilitate access to vaccines and medical expertise. Partnerships are critical to expanding reach and building trust. In some cases, however, grantees had difficulty finding willing partners among city and public health agencies.
- **Target messaging to those most affected.** Some **community-based organizations** found success in monitoring which locations and demographic groups had lower rates of vaccination. They then focused their efforts on connecting meaningfully with those groups to address questions and concerns and provide accurate information.

“Our door-to-door campaign was successful. We can definitely see how it affects turnout for events that we do across the community. It’s a way for us to provide direct one-on-one education and have those conversations. It continues to give us a pulse on what people are feeling in the community.”

- Grantee

Lessons for Philanthropic Organizations and Communications Teams Supporting Community-Based Organizations with Messaging Work

- **Recognize the complexities of and resources needed to encourage a community to be receptive to new messages.** **Philanthropic organizations** can better succeed with communications campaigns when they support not only communications teams in crafting relevant messages but community-based organizations in substantial efforts to reach target audiences. In a situation where people are constantly peppered with — and tired of — new messages and misinformation, community-based organizations must turn to strategies that build trust and connection with locals, including through resource-intensive efforts like one-on-one human interaction, live events, and offers of transportation, food, or other support. In addition, in a noisy communications environment, repeating messages over a sustained period may be necessary to convey key messages.
- **Provide user-friendly materials and guidance for community organizations.** By offering a range of materials, from FAQ guides to social media graphics, **communications teams** can support community-based grantees in their outreach. Ensuring that materials are clear, simple, and easy to tailor helps organizations more effectively reach their communities and focus on delivering critical information. **Philanthropic organizations** should consider that smaller organizations typically lack the resources for a dedicated communications person. Although in this campaign messaging toolkits were helpful, some grantees wished they had more direct guidance on communications best practices and the nuts and bolts of communications, particularly those who pivoted outside



Credit: Urban League Facebook

of their mission to support vaccine messaging work during the pandemic.

- **Offer customization to ensure materials resonate with priority populations.** Data-driven campaigns can create a strong foundation for effective messaging, but budgeting for additional customization is often necessary when prioritizing populations that are hardest to reach. Grantees shared that it made a difference to have their languages and communities represented in messaging materials. By providing customizable resources and being available for consultations, **communications teams** can be responsive to input and emerging needs from communities. Grantees recommended tailoring materials to reflect known community members, sharing that integrating photos and quotes from local faith leaders, medical professionals and scientists, and local politicians supported trust-building and provided an avenue for messages to land more effectively.

“We used resources that were translated in English, Swahili, Kinyarwanda, French [and] Somali. Those were a really great resource for us.”

- Grantee

Philanthropic organizations can further support alignment between communications teams and community-based organizations by setting up regular check-ins between the two groups to better understand what content would be most needed and useful.

- **Reinforce targeted campaigns with more comprehensive equity-focused work.** To get a specific health message across to communities effectively, **philanthropic organizations** can support grantees in acknowledging and addressing broader systemic health issues. Building a history of advancing equity and systems change gives more weight to a specific health message.

Insights on Working in a Divisive and Emergent Context

MFH, its partners, and grantees reflected on conducting a messaging campaign in a politically-charged and rapidly-changing environment, identifying key takeaways relevant to community-based work in other challenging contexts. The following lessons emerged with relevance to both community-based organizations implementing this type of work and philanthropic organizations. Relationship building rose to the top as a vital approach.

Lessons for Philanthropic Organizations About Supporting Working Relationships Among Grantees

- **Support coordination efforts.** To mitigate challenges of coordination across organizations, **philanthropic organizations** can specify funds for the labor required of grantees and partners to coordinate. They can also offer technical assistance to streamline work across grantees and make use of lessons learned from past coordination efforts. In this case, MFH supported a grantee learning community to connect community-based organizations through periodic learning calls.
- **Build collaborative relationships among community actors over the long term.** Because broad efforts like messaging campaigns benefit from well-established working relationships between organizations, **philanthropic organizations** can prepare for future work by fostering constructive interactions among groups and across sectors to strengthen a foundational infrastructure. In some cases, funders may be able to serve as a bridge between agencies and community nonprofits, making a case for the benefits of including different types of partners.

“[Prior to this campaign] there were so many organizations out here doing all kinds of outreach and engagement, and sometimes it could seem like they had competing messaging and activities instead of one unified approach... There was more competition than collaboration.”

- Grantee

Lessons for Community-Based Organizations About Working in a Divisive Context

- **Address misinformation and divisiveness by listening and responding to concerns.** Misinformation and lack of unity in addressing the pandemic persisted during this COVID-19 vaccination messaging campaign. However, many **community-based organizations** saw progress in promoting vaccines when they provided non-judgmental spaces for people to raise questions or concerns that could be answered by a trusted authority.
- **Develop partnerships over time to strengthen resilience and foster communication.** By seeking opportunities to establish working relationships with other groups and leveraging complementary skillsets toward the same goal, **community-based organizations** can shore up and diversify the resources they can rely on in hard times. Because grantees coping with COVID-19 found it easier to build on existing relationships rather than form brand new partnerships, they suggested that a general practice of strengthening connections with other agencies and nonprofits — for example through shared events or referral services — would better prepare organizations to handle future challenges together.

Lessons for Philanthropic Organizations About Supporting Emergent Strategy

- **Provide for rapid response.** A large-scale challenge like a pandemic can upend normal operations, for example precipitating a staffing crisis *and* creating a new urgent need for services. Although a thoroughly planned grantmaking response is valuable in addressing ongoing challenges, immediate assistance is also an essential role for **philanthropic organizations**. In the case of COVID, MFH quickly provided small grants to community-based organizations to address immediate community needs before turning to planning more sustained community support.
- **Support flexibility for grantees.** In any shifting or uncertain context, **philanthropic organizations** can give community-based grantees flexibility to adjust how they spend funds and shift their strategies based on what they and others learn along the way. Funders can also keep lines of communication open with grantees, for example through routine calls, to understand the changes that grantees are contending with and foster shared learning and adaptation through networking or peer learning sessions.
- **Supply grantees with useful, current information.** The pandemic created a data-tracking challenge as grantees had to keep up with COVID-19 hot spots, local vaccination rates, and changes in mandates, among other essential information. **Philanthropic organization** assistance in tracking secondary data, news, and policy changes and then providing grantees with useful, timely summaries could allow grantees to focus on their community-based work while staying well-informed. In addition, **communication teams** have an essential role in providing fresh, relevant, updated communications materials.

Looking Ahead

In the face of large-scale change and uncertainty, broader lessons from this messaging campaign can help philanthropic organizations and public health efforts support communications campaigns that effectively engage communities.

- **Narrative is powerful.** In this work, giving people positive messages about the idea of vaccination was an effective counterbalance to the many competing narratives and misinformation about the pandemic. The tested, straightforward messages offered reminders from trusted sources of the value, ease, and safety of the vaccine. These messages also opened doors to basing health decisions on credible, factual information.
- **Engaging with community members is essential to getting messages across.** MFH and its research partners spoke with a diverse set of Missourians at the start of the campaign to understand which messages would resonate and which types of messengers community members trusted. In addition, grantee organizations found that openly inviting questions about COVID-19 vaccination offered people who had concerns a safe opportunity to have them addressed. Diffusing tension by offering judgment-free discussion and factual information worked to build trust in a context frequently defined by division.
- **Community organizations hold vital understanding of the groups they serve.** Most grantee organizations were intimately familiar with the communities with whom they were sharing vaccine messaging, giving them key advantages in tailoring outreach strategies, finding imagery and messengers that reflected their communities, and recognizing local concerns and inequities. Many also had built trust over years of service, which demonstrated their interest in the community's long-term wellbeing rather than in scoring a quick political win.

These lessons apply broadly to messaging campaigns that aim to deliver compelling communications in a way that opens community members to hearing them. In today's world, baseless rumors can clearly gain traction, yet the messaging experience of communications teams joined with the deep community knowledge of local organizations remains a powerful combination to counteract them.