

4. News Channel for a New Public Health: Building an Online Community of Public Health Professionals with a Journalistic Lens

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Background:

We are all part of the national conversation about public health. We need to use robust digital platforms to enable that conversation and to connect public health innovators wherever they may be. An effective communications system uses great content and audience engagement to catalyze collaboration across sectors.

Methods:

In spring 2011, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation launched NewPublicHealth.org to create a vibrant online destination for public health information and discussion. The Foundation's Public Health team aimed to build a site with cross-sector appeal, and develop and distribute content using a news planning approach. The target audiences include both public health professionals and other leaders whose decisions can impact the public's health. The site is staffed by professional communicators — including former journalists — who create multi-perspective content for a dynamic digital news cycle. NewPublicHealth.org highlights free, publicly available tools (such as Wordpress, Twitter, Facebook and Storify) and offers best practices for using these tools, based on communications principles (such as eye-catching headlines, stories that matter, content curation and redistribution opportunities).

Results:

NewPublicHealth.org has accrued more than 400,000 page views from more than 200,000 unique visitors. Contributors include public health and government officials; researchers; and leaders in business, transportation, education and urban planning.

Conclusion:

This forum serves as a case study for using an online communications channel to advance public health objectives, forge connections and spark interdisciplinary dialogue. The lessons learned can be applied and scaled for health communications efforts for both large and small organizations.