

Moving With the Times: Updating the National Physical Activity Plan's Media and Communication Strategies to Increase Population-Level Physical Activity

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Abstract

In 2022, an interdisciplinary team of subject matter experts was convened to substantially revise the Mass Media sector content of the National Physical Activity Plan. The updated version recognizes the rapid pace at which the media landscape is evolving and includes a new sector name (Media and Communications) and revised strategies and tactics that reflect progress in the development of a national physical activity campaign brand (Move Your Way®). This commentary summarizes key changes and highlights the importance of ongoing collaboration between physical activity and media professionals to optimize promotion of physical activity through diverse channels.

Keywords

health communication, media, awareness, strategies, public health, physical activity, interventions, recommendations, message framing, collaboration

Introduction

Physical inactivity is a significant public health problem that must be addressed by coordinated multi-level solutions. The National Physical Activity Plan (NPAP) is a comprehensive set of policies, programs, and initiatives for increasing physical activity in all segments of the United States.¹ The first edition of the NPAP was released in 2010, included over 250 evidence-based recommendations, and was organized around 8 societal sectors (Public health; Healthcare; Education; Transportation, land use and community design; Parks, recreation, fitness and sports; Business and industry; Volunteer and non-profit organizations; Mass media).² Each sector identified overarching strategies (ie, broad, evidence-informed approaches to promote physical activity) to be achieved through implementation of specific tactics (ie, concrete policy, environment, and systems changes). The NPAP was revised and expanded in both 2016 and 2022, and in its present form includes more than 330 strategies and tactics across 10 societal sectors (with the addition of faith-based and military sectors). Developed and maintained by a public-private coalition, the NPAP is regularly updated with participation from a diverse set of sector-specific subject matter experts. These experts review evidence, provide expertise, and collaboratively work to

improve the physical activity landscape across the United States.

The Mass Media strategies and tactics outlined in 2010 recommended developing consistent messaging and branding, educating media professionals about the NPAP, and collaborating across sectors to develop and implement sustainable media campaigns to promote physical activity.² The public communication landscape changed dramatically between 2010 and 2022, with an exponential rise in use of digital and social media platforms and a substantial decline in engagement with traditional media sources (ie, print newspapers, radio, local television).^{3,4} In 2022, NPAP leadership convened

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a new interdisciplinary committee of ten physical activity and communications experts to review and revise the content of the Mass Media sector. In recognition of the importance of continual collaboration with media and communications professionals to effectively disseminate evidence-based physical activity promotion strategies to the public, NPAP leadership intentionally included media professionals (eg, journalist, health reporter) and academics in media and communication fields in the newly assembled committee. This ensured media professionals were involved in the co-creation of the new sector strategic priorities. To iteratively revise the 4 original strategies and associated tactics, the NPAP chair used members' interests and expertise to create small interdisciplinary subgroups of 2-3 members. Subcommittees then met to draft proposed revisions and presented their recommended changes to the full group, where revisions were finalized following constructive discussion. The resulting updates, described in this commentary and available online at <https://paamovewithus.org/media-and-communications/>, include a new sector name, align strategies and tactics with current media trends and contemporary health communications research, and reflect the progress made in the sector over the last decade. This paper aims to increase awareness of both the updated NPAP and the latest evidence-based strategies for communicating about and promoting physical activity, both reducing the gap between health promotion research and practice and providing specific guidance for professionals who work in this field.

Key Updates to the NPAP Media and Communications Sector

From Mass Media to Media and Communications

The sector name was strategically updated from “Mass Media” to “Media and Communications” to reflect the new realities in modern media and communications. Broadcast mass media using television and radio campaigns was the mainstream way to reach people in 2010. Several “new media” interventions (ie, website, email, text messaging) were also described at this time.⁵ The phrase social media was first introduced in the 2016 edition of the NPAP. Most recently, the rise of streaming services and social media platforms is a sea change in how public health communicators reach populations. Furthermore, the importance of communications through multiple channels has increased as research demonstrates that when individuals receive similar messages from multiple sources, their intentions to engage in a behavior increase.⁶

Emphasizing Collaborative Approaches to Physical Activity Promotion

The *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*, now in its second edition, represents a strong commitment from the U.S.

government to prioritize physical activity at a federal level.⁷ Unfortunately, despite considerable efforts made over the past 2 decades, public awareness of the physical activity guidelines remains low. A study reported that less than 10% of U.S. adults were aware of the physical activity guidelines in 2022.⁸ This highlights the need for collaboration between key stakeholders, including policy makers, government health agencies, health practitioners, media, and communication specialists to ensure the widest possible reach of physical activity messaging. Given the ubiquity of social media as a primary source of media production and consumption, the strategies updated in 2022 recommend partnership with technology companies in the design, implementation, dissemination, and evaluation of physical activity promotion approaches. Advancements in media and technology occur so rapidly that researchers and academics struggle to keep pace, thus necessitating collaboration to stay abreast of emerging technologies, and maximize the reach and impact of evidence-based strategies. These collaborations should include, but are not limited to, empowering researchers and public health professionals to use social media to promote physical activity to varied audiences, partnering with technology companies to design and deliver technology-based interventions, and working with social media platforms/influencers who have broad reach to optimize physical activity content using science-based messages.

Embracing an Established Brand

The first 2 mass media strategies in the NPAP 2016 edition focused on developing a standardized “brand” and launching a national campaign to promote physical activity. The updated edition specifically advocates for an expanded use of *Move Your Way*, the official promotional campaign created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in conjunction with the release of the 2nd edition of the Physical Activity Guidelines. *Move Your Way* is a national campaign to promote and brand physical activity that is aligned with behavioral science. Specifically, *Move Your Way* is supported by current evidence on effective motivational and behavioral strategies for promoting physical activity, recognizes the value of autonomy and competence, and encourages individuals to identify and engage in activities that are feasible and enjoyable for them.^{9,10} Because of its strong theory-based foundation, moving forward the updated NPAP endorses *Move Your Way* as the basis for developing, testing, and implementing evidence-based messages across the distinct sectors. Initial pilot campaigns implemented in partnership with local community organizations (eg, public health and parks and recreation departments) have demonstrated the feasibility of driving traffic to *Move Your Way* resources through community events, material distribution, and social media engagement.¹¹ However, much work remains to develop and disseminate context-specific messages across other sectors such as healthcare, education, and industry.

A Focus on Reframing Communications

All communications are framed in certain ways, and *strategically* reframing information can be a powerful way to change attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and behaviors.¹² Physical activity has traditionally been framed to the public based on medical convention, emphasizing that physical activity can help people lose weight and get healthier in the future. Yet, mounting research and calls to action suggest that to better engage the population and help individuals internalize the value of being active within their daily lives, it would be strategic to *reframe* physical activity to emphasize the immediate positive experiences that physical movement can bring (eg, increased energy, improved mood, social connection).¹³⁻¹⁵ This recommendation is well-supported by contemporary dual-process theories of exercise and physical activity that emphasize the key role positive affective experiences play in people's future decisions to exercise.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ In addition, research across multiple populations has found that goals and expectancies related to positive affective outcomes, such as well-being or stress reduction, are associated with increased physical activity participation compared to the more traditional health and weight loss goals.^{19,20} Future messaging research will aim to help reshape what people expect to experience from exercising, in positive ways. While research examining the effects of these "new" messages on physical activity beliefs and behaviors is still in its infancy, studies are starting to show that exercise messages featuring positive affective experiences (eg, well-being) are appealing and adaptive.^{21,22}

Importantly, the latest Physical Activity Guidelines highlight quality of life related physical activity benefits, such as mental health, improved cognition, and sleep, which deviates from prior communication efforts that focused almost exclusively on reduced risk of morbidity and mortality and illustrates an effort to reframe physical activity at the federal level.⁷ Because of numerous decades of exercise marketing and socialization emphasizing the medicalized benefits of exercise, much work remains in order to more effectively communicate about and help the population internalize the positive affective and quality of life benefits exercise brings.²³ Advancing evidence about the need to reframe physical activity motivated NPAP leadership to strategically partner with the Frameworks Institute to improve physical activity messaging and promotion,²⁴ and to elevate reframing from being an action-focused "tactic" (in the 2010-2016 editions of the NPAP) to an overarching "strategy" that serves as a high-level guiding principle for the next phase of our work.

Implications and Future Directions

Media and communications are important tools that can influence the public's perspectives about and experiences with physical activity. Health promotion practitioners whose roles involve promoting physical activity can be encouraged that

the updated strategies and tactics reflect progress in the media and communications sector and can support strategic health promotion planning. However, a significant challenge facing this sector in the years to come is the rapid pace at which media and communications technologies are evolving. In the field of public health, the Diffusion of Innovations model highlights the slow pace at which effective programs and ideas are implemented in practice.²⁵ For example, in current practice, "new" technologies that are integrated into research projects that take 3-5 years to complete may be obsolete by the time results are published and disseminated. There are multiple reasons for this knowledge-to-practice gap, but the barriers are not insurmountable. In an area like media where innovation occurs rapidly, professionals in the fields of physical activity promotion and public health must explore strategies to become more proactive, adaptable, and collaborative. The NPAP is intended to serve as a guidance document for the development of both state plans and local plans,^{26,27} and indeed, this is already occurring. A study of physical activity and public health practitioners found that within a year of the launch of the original plan, 72% had used it in their work.²⁸ It is expected that the changes in the Media and Communications sector will affect state and local efforts in the following years.

Ongoing collaboration between physical activity researchers, public health practitioners, and media professionals will be essential to facilitate dissemination of evidence-based physical activity promotion strategies to widespread and diverse audiences. Through interdisciplinary collaborations, we can learn from early adopters and design messages that align with consumers' values and strategies that are user-friendly and feasible to implement. More frequent NPAP revisions may also be necessary to keep pace with the rapidly changing media landscape. For example, artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models (LLMs) were not mentioned in the 2022 update, but are increasingly relevant in all areas of life, especially media and communications. The role of AI and LLMs in the development and dissemination of physical activity messages should be prioritized and explored. In summary, health communication is relevant across many sectors (eg, education, healthcare, public health, etc.) where leaders (eg, teachers, healthcare providers, practitioners) are interacting and communicating with individuals and communities, and the revised NPAP content will serve as a useful guide to enact and evaluate evidence-based strategies in the years to come.

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