

The Role of Communications in the TTURC Initiative

As we move forward with the TTURC initiative and have more research results to present, communications will be increasingly important as we attempt to reach a broad audience of multiple stakeholders, including researchers, practitioners, policy makers, the public, and smokers in need of help. In this edition of the Networker, we explore some ways the TTURC Centers are communicating their research to diverse audiences. Articles in this issue address such topics as: the value of communications to the research endeavor; specific actions taken to minimize the misinterpretation of results; and approaches to help facilitate internal and external communications. In addition, updates to the tturcpartners.com website are described.

A PI's Perspective on Communications

By Louri Groves



Frances Leslie, Ph.D.

A recent interview with UCI Professor and TTURC Director Frances Leslie, PhD, revealed insights and lessons learned regarding the role of communications.

What was your view of communications as a function during the earlier stages of the TTURC initiative?

In the beginning, I thought a communications grant would be a distraction—it was so far removed from my own expertise. I thought I was not qualified to be a PI on such a project.

And your opinion today?

Now I have an understanding that communications is a separate discipline and that it has value to our research.

How is it valuable to your research?

Most recently I had the opportunity to interact with an external group consisting of policy makers, educators, and community leaders. It's important that external audiences understand the research thoroughly.

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Translating Science: The Investigator – Communicator Partnership

By Suzanne Moriarty and Brian Hitsman

Five Ingredients for Successful Translation of Science

1. Trust
2. Shared Expectations
3. Patience
4. Face to Face Dialogue
5. Give and Take

Translating science to make it more accessible to a wider audience involves a close partnership between the investigator and the communicator.

While it is possible

for a communicator to translate findings without substantial investigator input, our experience has taught us that a collaborative, investigator - communicator approach increases the likelihood that the message being delivered is based on an accurate understanding of the science, a clear sense of the implications of the results, and an appreciation of the overall context of the research.

Looking back at our investigator-communicator collaboration over the last couple of years, we have identified five ingredients that we believe are key to the translation process. These key ingredients blend together to protect the integrity of the research.

Trust

“Incorporating communications as an integral member of the research team, has allowed our communications officer to build solid working relationships with TTURC: NEFS investigators, based on earned trust,” explained David B. Abrams, PI. A partnership based on trust reassures the investigator that the communicator is committed to preserving the scientific message.

Shared Expectations

One of the first points to negotiate when translating science is matching the strategy to science. “I serve as a bridge between the science and the outside world,” explains Scott Turner, Science Writer, Brown News Service, “part of my role is getting to know the reporters and their venues. My credibility with reporters is maintained when they know I can be counted on to follow-through and when I selectively contact them with solid science that has implications for their audience.” Matching the translation to the media channel is just as important as matching the findings to the

journal in which it will be published.

Patience

Researchers and communicators bring different skill sets, writing styles, and perspectives to the partnership. Embarking on this joint venture requires patience and an appreciation of the potential benefits of these complementary attributes. Often the communicator will repeatedly probe for clarity in the investigator’s summary and implications of his or her research, whereas the investigator may end up providing some very basic instruction on concepts (e.g., statistical methods) needed to understand the research.

Face-to-Face Dialogue

We have found that a face-to-face discussion of the translation leads to the best outcome.

Describing research findings through email tends to repeat the technical language used in the discussion section of the manuscript. Face-to-face meetings encourage the use of conversational terms. Two-way communication fosters immediate clarification, feedback, and negotiation.



Brian Hitsman, Ph.D. and Suzanne Moriarty, MSW

Give and Take

The development of a communications product is an iterative process that requires the continued input of both parties. The language of one’s research discipline has evolved to precisely communicate a concept, but may place a barrier to those outside the field. Effective partnering between investigator and communicator requires a willingness for both to negotiate the appropriate mix of technical language and common terms that are easily understood by non-scientists, though sometimes not as accurate scientifically speaking.

We have been struck by how much the communicator – investigator partnership mirrors the transdisciplinary research process. Many of the lessons learned from our partnership are believed to be fundamental to the success of transdisciplinary research. The same process responsible for the synergy that promises to advance the scientific understanding of tobacco dependence is fundamental to the effective translation and dissemination of that knowledge to a wide variety of interested audiences.

Communicating Challenging Science

By Megan A. Kasimatis



One common challenge facing the TTURC communications directors is the need to translate complex scientific research into everyday language. It is not an easy task to condense several pages of discussion about a particular finding into an eye-catching headline that will attract the press while remaining scientifically accurate. “One of the fears researchers have when transmitting findings to the media is that

attempts to simplify the findings into a clear-cut message could alter the scientific accuracy and mislead the public,” said Caryn Lerman, Ph.D.

Because TTURC science is complex and stories are often released by the media without any direct contact between the researchers and the reporter, the possibility for misinterpretation remains a risk. For example, in 1999 the PENN/Georgetown TTURC released a finding that a specific variant of the DRD2 dopamine receptor gene could influence smoking cessation. At the time the PENN/Georgetown TTURC did not issue a press release on this finding. However, the article was picked up by Newsweek and cited in a brief article that stated “Just five days after President Clinton announced, in his State of the Union address, that the Justice Department is preparing to recover money that Medicaid spends treating smoking-related diseases, scientists have given the companies a possible out.”

The article referenced the findings of the PENN/Georgetown TTURC and implied that the genetic findings somehow eliminated some of “big tobacco’s” responsibility for nicotine addiction. Thankfully, in this particular incident, no additional misleading media attention resulted from the Newsweek article.

In order to prevent future media misinterpretation we have developed several strategies to ensure effective communication of difficult material. Developing a solid take-home message internally is crucial, especially if there is a possibility that more than one researcher could be interviewed about a particular finding. PENN/Georgetown researchers work closely with the communications director on developing and understanding the take-home message for press releases, media mailings and other forms of media communication. We are also considering attaching a standardized fact sheet about the genetic research being conducted at our center to all future press releases for reporters to use as an informal guide for their own stories.

A Guide to Challenging Genetic Terms

Allele - One of a pair, or series of alternative forms of a gene, that occur at a given locus (position) in a chromosome.

Dopamine - A neurotransmitter that affects brain processes that contribute to movement, emotional response, and ability to experience pleasure and rewards.

Genotype - The composition of alleles for a given gene or genes.

Pharmacogenetics - The study of how genetic factors affect drug metabolism and effects.

Phenotype - The visible properties of an organism that are produced by the interaction of the genotype and the environment.

Pleiotropy - A condition in which a single gene influences more than one trait, more specifically having multiple phenotypic expressions.

Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) - A laboratory test used to amplify a particular DNA sequence.

It is important to consider the fact that complex scientific language is often language which health reporters may not feel comfortable tackling. Rather than assuming that our audiences are informed and comfortable addressing our material, we have developed open relationships with many of our media contacts so that we can be viewed as a resource as stories are produced. We have often found that reporters are eager to have the factual content of their stories reviewed and they may submit several drafts before going to print. Establishing this type of relationship whenever possible has proven to be the best way to ensure some element of control over how the information is presented to the public.

The risk of misinterpretation does exist; however, researchers are not without recourse if this does occur. Most newspapers are willing to retract any incorrect information that has been printed or will accept an op-ed piece regarding the article written by a member of the research team. Although the complexity of TTURC research continues to make its translation to the public a challenging task, it is this challenge that makes the work of the TTURC communications directors both stimulating and rewarding.

Writing an OpEd Piece: The Challenges and the Pay-offs

By Pem McNerney

"You must go beyond one's own findings to make the op-ed of broad interest. You must draw on the extant literature." - Jody Sindelar

The editorial page editors I have worked with generally are looking for op-ed writers who can write, who can make deadline and who can come up with a topic that is both interesting and timely.

While they do sometimes want "evergreen" opinion pieces – those that are of interest but are not related to a specific news peg – they generally like to have op-ed pages that are current and that relate to the news that readers are finding in the rest of the paper. Picking a timely topic – such as one that is going up for a vote soon — will increase your chances of having an opinion piece published.

This can be difficult for most researchers, because their schedules are so packed with their own research, travel and other responsibilities. But a willingness to put that aside for the time it takes to write the piece, submit it and have it edited, is necessary.

Making sure op-ed pieces are timely can be the most complicated part of the puzzle. But it's one that Jody Sindelar, Ph.D., a principal investigator with the Yale TTURC, has managed effectively in her two contributions to the op-ed page of The Courant, Connecticut's largest paper. An op-ed last year about increasing the state's cigarette tax and one this year on enacting a more stringent ban on smoking in bars and restaurants, helped make a difference, according to advocates in the state.

As part of an effort to keep researchers here informed about current tobacco topics in the news, the TTURC during the legislative session regularly sends out an email newsletter about tobacco in the news. By keeping current with what is in the news, we can focus our op-ed writing

energy on topics that are relevant. And we can pitch them at a time when they are most likely to make a difference, shortly before a vote in the legislature or when they are due to go to the governor for his signature.

Sindelar, an associate professor in the division of Health Policy & Administration in the School of Public Health at Yale University and a principal investigator with the Yale TTURC, says that she likes to write op-eds that are policy oriented, of current interest and that are related to her own research. But she noted that sometimes, "you have to go beyond one's own findings to make the op-ed of broad interest. You must draw on the extant literature."



She also says that you have to draw the readers' attention quickly and be extremely brief. In fact, most op-ed page guidelines will tell you exactly how long the op-ed should be. It's best to send in what is requested, and no more. Sindelar also recommends drawing analogies from everyday life, or relating the op-ed to another

aspect of the readers' lives.

Sindelar also says that writing an op-ed can be a little uncomfortable for researchers used to writing long papers that cite all the pros and cons of a position in great detail. "It is hard to just make a point briefly without offering all the pros and cons and without citing all the literature and supporting facts, but an op-ed must be extremely brief and focused to be successful," she said.

Website Forum Used to Facilitate Communications

By Jeff Baskin



Ping Sun, Ph.D.

When USC TTURC members want to “talk” with more than one colleague at a time, they don’t have to set up a conference call or send out a broadcast e-mail or lure researchers to meetings with donuts; they can just turn to the Forum.

Ensnconced on the web at <http://tturc.usc.edu/>, the Forum is a lively blend of academic roundtable and coffee klatch where TTURC

members scattered across three USC campuses can discuss anything from “Population Dynamics” to “Papers in Progress” to 50 other subject areas, including jokes. Some subject areas – or boards — are open to the general public; others are restricted to specific members within TTURC; and new boards are added as needed.

“Without the Forum, we couldn’t get our work done,” said Paula Palmer, Ph.D., associate director of USC’s TTURC, who pointed out how invaluable it was for last year’s Transcultural Perspectives on Tobacco Use and Health Promotion Conference, co-hosted by the USC TTURC. Through the Forum, USC TTURC was able to coordinate the presentations and other activities of approximately 180 attendees from the U.S., China and Canada.

When TTURC opened its doors in 2000, “we didn’t have a Forum,” said Ping Sun, Ph.D., director of TTURC’s Information Technology. “We just used e-mail, but Dr. Johnson (C. Anderson Johnson, director of TTURC) found that it didn’t meet our needs.”

The center’s first solution was to use an existing discussion board system designed by a commercial Internet Service Provider, but it proved unsatisfactory. Hiring an outside designer to create one would have been too expensive, so Sun and a part-time research assistant were handed the assignment of building the Forum.

The result was so successful that it spawned Forums dedicated to the Institute for Health Promotion & Disease Prevention Research (IPR), where TTURC is headquartered, and for the recently established Transdisciplinary

Drug Abuse Prevention Research Center, a direct outgrowth of TTURC.

Sun now has two full-time IT staff members working for him on a wide variety of projects. Already in place is a web-based calendar of activities; a file center where journal articles, presentations and other materials are archived; and a data center that assists researchers in creating and administering surveys, collecting and analyzing data.

The IT team is also testing a reference site that will house published journal articles and papers in progress. Readers will be able to search the published articles using key terms, while co-authors of papers in progress will be able to post comments and revisions

online. In addition, Sun and his group are designing a wireless network that will enable researchers to use their computers in the field to collect data and to disseminate computer-based interventions.

Fellow TTURCs interested in using systems similar to those created at USC should contact Sun at sping@usc.edu.

Some of the Boards on the USC Website

- Seminars of Special Interest to the TTURC Community - Global Access
- Citations of Interest - Posting of TTURC and other citations - Global Access
- Papers, Abstracts and Publications - Discussion of TTURC work - Global Access
- Other TTURC Centers - Reporting and discussing activities at other Centers.
- TTURC Statistics Core - Discussing and requesting assistance on statistics-related issues.
- General - Includes general announcements and information
- “Global access” = No restricted access.

Integrating Research Data

By Louri Groves

“We look forward to having transdisciplinary input into data interpretation and manuscript preparation which will result in advances in methodological design and theoretical frameworks for our work.”
- Sandra Loughlin

Over the past four years, the UCI TTURC Informatics and Communications core has diligently worked towards integrating research data across disciplines and species.

This has occurred through the efforts of the Informatics, and Communications core and the use of web-based tools.

The first step was to build an infrastructure.

The internal web pages are essential elements of the internal infrastructure, as they address the challenges of managing data housed and administered under various university departments and schools. Through the internal web pages, faculty and staff have access to data and analytic resources and tools that will enhance their work.

The Research Section of the internal web site will help facilitate transdisciplinary research. Specifically, it allows investigators across disciplines to share research techniques, project descriptions, progress, and data. Most recently, researchers decided to share primary data and preliminary manuscripts for feedback. “This unprecedented sharing is possible because of the existence of the file-sharing function in the internal pages of our website, which creates an intranet accessible only to members,” said Sandra E. Loughlin, UCI TTURC assistant director. “We look forward to having transdisciplinary input into data interpretation and manuscript preparation which will result in advances in methodological design and theoretical frameworks for our work.”

Informatics core drives data integration.

While the Communications core provides both investiga-

tors and support staff with a library of resources to maintain efficient daily operations, the Informatics core provides researchers with a useful set of tools to compare data from humans and animals across disciplines. According to UCI Adjunct Professor and Informatics Director James Belluzzi, PhD, utilizing a secure file-sharing website (Sharepoint) to integrate and disseminate summary data files across laboratories will be valuable in bridging the gap between laboratories and allow a more rapid exchange of data than previously available.

Future focus on federated databases.

Currently, effort is focused on developing laboratory databases and establishing systems to federate these individual databases to facilitate data exchanges between projects. Federated databases, databases that are housed separately but can communicate with each other, are linked by an XML wrapper. They serve as the basis for the functional Biomedical Informatics Research Network (BIRN) that was recently established by NIH, with UCI Professor Steven Potkin, MD, who also serves as the principal investigator of the human brain imaging studies for the UCI TTURC. By moving to a federated database model, researchers will not only have the opportunity to exchange data between projects, and to also eventually permit interaction with the BIRN network.



Members of the Brain Imaging Study/Lab. Left to Right: Dave Keator, James Fallon, Ph.D., Steve Potkin, M.D.

“It has taken some time and effort to reach this level, but with full cooperation from our investigators and a solid infrastructure, we are well on our way to substantive integration across projects,” said Dr. Loughlin.

Drs. Belluzzi and Loughlin are also collaborators of the animal studies research laboratory.

Interview Continued...

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We need effective strategies to communicate to our key audiences beyond the scientific community. The communications core is responsible for the development and execution of these strategies. I appreciate the planning involved to communicate our findings to a broader audience.

What role does the communications program play at the UCI TTURC?

We have communications as a fifth service core, which plays a critical role to the center. The communications director advises me as part of the strategic planning process of the center. Because we are a diverse and widely distributed group who did not work together prior to the TTURC initiative, we have numerous communications challenges to overcome. We needed to learn how to communicate effectively with each other to ensure disciplinary integration. We're not best friends, but we honor and respect each other and our work immensely. Communications helps facilitate our collaborations and helps us to be more concrete.

Can you give me a specific example of how the communications program has helped or hindered the progress of your center?

Fortunately we hired a communications director who had a background in strategic planning. She helped our core directors to develop an action plan, which proved to be very helpful in giving us a concrete direction for our future.

What is the importance of strategic planning? It makes people think through what they need to do to achieve their goals and develop a time frame in which to accomplish them. Strategic planning allows you the opportunity to identify goals—it stops us from living in the moment and makes us look at the long term.

Any lessons learned or insights gained as the PI of this grant?

I have a much greater appreciation for the need to reach out and share my research with a broader audience with language that clearly explains the value of the research. As scientists, we all have an obligation to make sure that our findings are understood and can lead to valuable appli-

cations. Reaching a broader audience beyond the scientific community increases that opportunity.

Do you believe there is a difference between interpersonal communications and organizational communications? Absolutely. What's the difference?

Organizational communications is not personal. It involves helping to develop the organization's goals, planning the strategies to achieve them, getting everyone to agree to them, and implementing them.

What were your original goals for this RWJF Communications grant?

In year one we planned to build an internal communications infrastructure. We don't work in the same building. We didn't know each other well. We had different styles of interaction. We had to overcome many barriers and we needed a solid infrastructure to help facilitate our collaborations. The following year we focused on developing a framework for our external communications activities. As we have more exciting research findings to share, we needed to plan out how we are going to disseminate our findings most effectively. We are actually on track.

You have already alluded to the role that communications plays in your center. How about the network of centers?

Planning a solid external communications program, as we have more findings to share, becomes increasingly important to successful dissemination. I believe the communications function can facilitate a coordinated effort.

What do you see as Partners role?

They have a critical function to integrate the centers and facilitate cross-center communications to develop a coordinated communications infrastructure and to publicize our collective findings.

What advice would you give to other scientists?

Overcome your prejudices about things beyond your immediate research environment and invest the time and effort to understand the benefits a successful communication program can provide.

Check Out the TTURC Partners Updated Website! WWW.TTURCPARTNERS.COM



We are excited about the changes we have made to the TTURC Partners website. Some of these changes include:

Journal Citations and Abstracts: Probably the most exciting addition to the website is a citation database that will allow the user to view TTURC journal citations and abstracts, presenting the most recent publications first. In addition, the user will have the option of viewing citations by Center, researcher, and year of publication. The database will be updated regularly. Some additional changes include:

Research Questions Page: This page provides the user with a list of research questions addressed by each Center.

Scrolling News Bar: The “Scrolling News Bar” will provide users information about the latest TTURC happenings, including news releases and conference information.

The Netwoker: Current and back issues are available in .pdf form.

In addition, we’ve made several changes that make navigating the website much easier. We think these changes will make the site more timely, interactive, and user-friendly. Please visit www.tturcpartners.com and check it out for yourself.

News and Notes

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