

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 21: Storytelling Saves Lives: TSET Health Communication Team

November 30, 2021

Summary: Storytelling is a central tenet of impacting human behavior and generating real social change. That's why the TSET Health Communication (HC) team is an important part of executing the agency's mission. But creating messages that resonate is no easy task. Hear from three special guests about the logic, strategies, and execution of TSET's award-winning HC team: Renee Nolen Rosencrans of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Office of Smoking and Health shares her expertise on why health-focused messaging campaigns are critical to changing and understanding poor health behaviors; Sjonna Paulson, TSET HC Director, shares the history, evolution and strategies behind our work in HC; and Laura Beebe, an epidemiologist with the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center who works closely with TSET as an evaluator to ensure that our messages are effective, shares interesting results from some of our most impactful public health campaigns.

[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello, and welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast. I am your co-host James Tyree, a health communication consultant at TSET.

Cate Howell: And I'm Cate Howell, TSET podcast producer. Today's episode is a fun one for us, because, well, we get to talk about us!

TSET's goal is to improve health outcomes for all Oklahomans by reducing unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, and encouraging healthy behaviors, like regular physical activity and a balanced nutritional diet. If you've heard any of our previous episodes, you know that we approach this mission from a variety of angles, like strategic partnerships with non-profits, scientific research centers, and local governments for infrastructure transformations. But another really important method we employ is through our Health Communication department.

J. Tyree: That is right. You know, storytelling is a powerful tool when used effectively. Now, everyone who wants to influence public opinion uses storytelling through advertisements and marketing. The tobacco industry uses this power to influence consumers to buy and, ultimately, become addicted to their products – with no regard for the physical and financial damage caused by these addictions. Fast-food restaurants and companies that sell unhealthy foods and drinks often use similar tactics. TSET and other public health advocates work hard to provide an alternative perspective in the marketing and advertising sphere by creating positive, health-conscious messages that encourage life-saving and enhancing behavioral changes.

C. Howell: And evidence proves that it works. Our first guest, Renee Nolen Rosencrans with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, explains strategies for health promotion on a national level and how TSET's work helps to influence the public health landscape nationwide.

[02:00]

[Feel-good piano music ("[Jazzy Beats](#)" by Life Is An Epic Film)]

Renee Nolen Rosencrans: [00:40] My name is Renee Nolen Rosencrans, and I am a health communications specialist at the CDC in the Office on Smoking and Health in the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

J. Tyree: Renee has spent the last eight years with the CDC developing strategies with federal and state governments to promote healthy messages amidst a sea of harmful ones.

R. Rosencrans: So you think about marketing, you know, you get marketed to all the time, right? Like you know, Coca-Cola or, you know, a pair of shoes, whatever you have it. And in health communication and health marketing, we're trying to market healthy behaviors. And as a part of that we're trying to get people to change their behaviors so that they can live healthier, and then also share with them, educate them on what healthy behaviors are and what some of the harms to their health could be for a given behavior. And in the case of tobacco control, we're talking about the health harms associated, the health consequences associated with tobacco use, with exposure to secondhand smoke.

J. Tyree: The CDC Control and other federal agencies have the daunting task of trying to promote health awareness to the whole nation, but the CDC has found that a combination of state and federal messaging is key, as Renee explains.

R. Rosencrans: We support health communications campaigns at the state level because we know they work. They are an evidence-based effective strategy to help people quit smoking, to help people, and especially young people, from ever starting to smoke, and to help shape the social norms around using tobacco. So that's the "why" part. Because, you know, CDC is a science-based agency, and so the evidence points to health communications campaigns being an effective strategy. But, and this gets into the "how" a little bit, they are a core component of what we call CDC Best Practices for Comprehensive Tobacco Control Programs. So we know what works to effectively reduce tobacco use. And CDC Best Practices is basically a guidebook for states and locals to follow, to build and maintain a comprehensive tobacco control program, of which one of those components is health communications campaigns. So, all of the components have to work together to be effective. So, we support them through our Best Practices document, through our technical assistance that we offer the states as a part of their cooperative agreement funding.

And at the state level, when it comes to tobacco control, that's where the rubber really hits the road. We can do some things at the national level, like promote cessation nationally, but at the state level is where a given state is really going to be able to, like, target their hard-to-reach populations within their communities better than we can at the state level, and also do some more tailored messaging and more targeted marketing than we can do at the national level.

J. Tyree: One way the CDC supports Oklahoma's health communication efforts is through the Media Campaign Resource Center, or MCRC, which is a CDC database of health-conscious advertisements. State government agencies can take the advertisements from the MCRC and adapt them to fit their local audiences. Now, TSET not only uses ads from the database, but also submits ads for other states to adopt and adapt.

R. Rosencrans: Over the years, Oklahoma has given...I think it's up to about 45 or so ads that other states and partners can use. And I'm thinking most recently, the ones that I can recall are the flavors ads—It's Not OK flavors ads about tobacco industry flavors targeting children, e-cigarette flavors; and then smoking in cars with children; and then, the series of ads about the corrective statements that the tobacco industry had to make to correct, you know, how they had deceived people on the health effects of cigarettes. So because of all of those submissions, I mean, your ads have been used by states and locals across the country. So from Oregon and Washington, all the way to the Carolinas. And, in particular, counties in Ohio and in Tennessee are big fans. [laughs] They use your materials—yeah!

So MCRC is one, and then another is, you know, anytime we've asked you guys to present on the media and communications or community practice, you're always happy to do it. And from there, state health departments and national partners have been able to take advantage of your learnings. And ultimately, documenting what we do, what worked, what didn't work, and then sharing it with the field so that others can learn and not reinvent the wheel is how we make progress, because we're all working toward the same goal, and that is to help people quit smoking or using tobacco. So, helping the field learn allows them to save time and resources and be more successful.

J. Tyree: TSET is glad to have the resources that the CDC offers, but our health communication team, in collaboration with VI Marketing and Branding, is dedicated to producing creative, strategic and original content.

R. Rosencrans: Another thing is that, like, your campaigns are innovative. They follow the evidence. In particular, there's a couple that come to mind, or several digital campaigns that really just are a great example of meeting people where they are. And you have just found really creative and innovative ways of doing that, of reaching people where they are.

And one in particular was about micro-moments. You know, these moments of where someone who smokes wakes up first thing in the morning, maybe a little early, and they need a fix, right? They're craving a cigarette and they need to smoke. Well, you guys figured out, "Okay, well, if we ran ads on Facebook around that time of the morning promoting the tobacco helpline, then we're getting them help right when they need it."

Another example was like, using milestones in your life. So, an anniversary or a birthday, as a way to promote cessation at a time when they're happy and thinking about the year. So for example, for an anniversary, you know, you could be celebrating a year smoke free. So that was an example of one of the social media ads.

J. Tyree: TSET funds important public health programs and campaigns like the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline, Shape Your Future and many others. But people cannot benefit from these great resources and programs if they don't know about them. So using various forms of media to alert Oklahomans about them is a crucial service that the TSET Health Communication team provides.

R. Rosencrans: We have to educate people, right? So you think about, you can – as part of your Comprehensive Tobacco Control Program, you can have a quitline like the Oklahoma Tobacco Quitline that provides a comprehensive set of services, but if people don't know about those services and don't know that it's available to them, then they won't get used. And they're evidence-based cessation support services that are gonna help people quit if people are able to get to them. So the way that they're going to find out about those services being available is through promoting them, and health communications campaigns – that's where they come in in the tobacco control role. You can promote your cessation services. There's this symbiotic relationship there.

[Laid-back piano music (“[Brand New Start](#)” by Joseph)]

J. Tyree: The CDC in collaboration with state agencies constantly monitors the results of these promotional campaigns, and the consensus is that they work – big time. Hearing people's stories and bringing information to the public with empathy and creativity can lead to lasting and profound change.

R. Rosencrans: Health communications is really important because it can be really effective. It is evidence-based. And we say that all the time, right? It's evidence-based. But when done well, it can have the capacity to really create population-level change. And I can point to our national media campaign Tips from Former Smokers. Because of that national media campaign, a million people have quit for good, and that's a big deal. So these people's testimonials in that campaign, their stories have had just as much impact as a physician helping someone quit could, you know? That's really important. Media campaigns are really important at helping get people to help. You can have, the best quitline in the world, you can have the best doctor in the world, but if people don't get inspired to try to quit, they won't, or they may not. And so that's where media campaigns can really help inspire people and shift the social norm.

[11:57]

C. Howell: So the CDC works closely and flexibly with state agencies to craft compelling public health messages. TSET is a big part of that work here in Oklahoma. But what does the TSET Health Communication team actually do (other than create this podcast, of course)? What are some of our most impactful campaigns, and how have we evolved over the years? Here to answer those questions and more is Sjonna Paulson, TSET Health Communication Director. She's been with TSET since its early years, and she's seen and nurtured the team's innovative growth and impact over the years.

[Uplifting marimba music (“[Persephone](#)” by Big Score Audio)]

[12:36]

Sjonna Paulson: My name is Sjonna Paulson, and I'm the Director of Health Communication at TSET.

I have always been interested in communications. My parents owned a shop in Tahlequah, and I helped with the advertising and decorating the front windows to draw people in. And so that fascination carried me through to college where I graduated from the University of Oklahoma, College of Journalism with a PR degree. And from there I worked in corporate and non-profit PR for most of my life.

When my son was born in '96, he was born with a lung problem, which caused him to go on heart-lung bypass, and this made me very aware about the issues that I needed to protect him from as he grew up, like the dangers of secondhand smoke. His lungs were weakened, and I wanted to help him be as healthy as he could.

From there, I moved to the American Lung Association and worked for them as a marketing director for the state, supporting everyone's lung health. From there, I became interested in a position at a small state agency called the Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust. And I interviewed, and I became the sixth employee in 2007 of TSET.

C. Howell: Being among the first to join the TSET team and the first person to really focus on health communication and messaging provides for a really interesting perspective on her part. Since TSET's founding 20 years ago, the agency has grown considerably, but the mission and the heart has remained the same.

S. Paulson: When I joined TSET in 2007 and just being the sixth employee, the board of directors for TSET actually outnumbered the staff at our agency. It was very interesting. It was a very small staff who was all very mission-driven about improving the health in Oklahoma. It was like finding kindred spirits who wanted to help make my home state a healthier place for our future generations.

The agency was still very small with a limited budget, and they had been layering in programs to create a Comprehensive Tobacco Control Program that was recommended by the Centers for Disease Control.

The very first program that they launched was in 2003, and that was the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline, and it had a small promotion to let people know about this free service. After that, they layered in community-level programs and system-level programs. These programs were designed to help prevent and reduce tobacco use across the state. And when I came on board, they were just layering in the last piece of this comprehensive program, which was health communications.

J. Tyree: The purpose of the health communication team was to provide strong, unified messages about our mission and programs to the people of Oklahoma. We started from humble beginnings, but like the rest of the agency, we have blossomed.

S. Paulson: The goal for TSET's investment in health communication is to support the reduction of the leading causes of preventable death in our state, which are cancer and cardiovascular disease. And we do that by preventing and reducing the two main risk factors: obesity and tobacco.

Since 2007, when we launched the Tobacco Stops With Me program, we have added more programs throughout the years. In 2012, we launched Shape Your Future, which helps Oklahomans and their families learn to eat nutritiously and keep physical activity in the forefront of their lifestyle so that kids are getting 60 minutes of physical activity a day and adults know they need to be getting 30 minutes a day. It's also about filling half your plates with fruits and vegetables and getting enough sleep.

And one of the latest efforts we've done is the TSET Healthy Youth Initiative mass communication campaign which consists of two parts. One targets urban youth and one targets rural youth with information about how tobacco and vaping and smoking changes the way they think, affects their brain and rewrites pathways in their brain. We also do a nutrition program called Swap Up, which helps youth think about how the food they're eating makes them feel and about the goals that they want to do. So when they eat healthier, they're better able to perform in school and in sports.

Those messages give Oklahomans choices, and those choices are very important because the tobacco industry spends \$120 million annually in Oklahoma marketing to find replacement smokers for the 7,500 Oklahomans who die each year from smoking. As a result of that, those replacement smokers are our 1,300 kids under the age of 18 in our state who become new daily smokers each year. We need to let them know they have choices and that tobacco is an addiction and it's something that they don't need to add into their lives. And for our food and beverage and restaurant companies, they spend almost \$14 billion on advertising in the United States. More than 80% of this advertising promotes fast food, sugary drinks, candy and unhealthy snacks. These companies target children, teens, and our communities of color with marketing for the least healthy products. This marketing undermines parents' efforts to encourage healthy eating for their children and contributes to diet-related health disparities affecting communities of color, and especially our low-income in Oklahoma.

C. Howell: \$14 billion. That's a pretty discouraging number. So how does TSET make it work? And how does our six-person team measure up against Big Tobacco and the massive fast food industry?

S. Paulson: As TSET began to develop our health communication campaigns, we really wanted the messaging to be for and about Oklahomans. We wanted to meet Oklahomans where they were at in their lifestyle and offer small changes that could lead them down a healthier path. To do that, you need to give people the facts so that they know about the choices that they're going to make. But telling people facts, doesn't often change your path or your mind. You have to also grab people by their heartstrings and let them know how unhealthy behaviors affect not only themselves, but their families.

And so one of the big things that we've done at TSET is try to incorporate the stories of Oklahomans, the struggles that they've had with tobacco addiction, how it's affected

their lives and how, when they quit using tobacco, how their lives changed in and improved. By offering these testimonials or these stories from where we're at and a view of where we can go, you're offering them the opportunity to improve their lives and make a better path for their family for generations to come.

[Inspirational piano music "[Neverwhere](#)" by Celine Love]

J. Tyree: You know, it takes a diversity of tactics and the combined efforts of dedicated people across multiple organizations to generate the sustainable change that TSET is committed to realizing here in Oklahoma.

S. Paulson: Customized health communication programs are proven to be one of the most effective strategies for reducing tobacco use and promoting healthy behaviors in a population. Health communication interventions consist of research-tested and evaluated public health focused marketing campaigns with coordinated elements for TV, radio, broadcast, outdoor, out-of-home print, digital, social media and website content, everything that surrounds our life. TSET-funded prevention programs like health communication follow proven business practices, marketing practices, public health strategies to improve the public's health in our state, and through a comprehensive program by working on community-level programs, state-level initiatives, by investing in research and in health communication, TSET is able to create healthier environments, and that supports citizens and employees and patrons and students to be able to make healthier decisions where they live, work, learn and play.

[22:30]

C. Howell: So we have all these strategies and reasons for doing what we do. But there's one key component to all this that can't be overlooked: how do we know we're making a difference? We need concrete measures of what works and what doesn't work so we know we're on the right track – or we can adjust if needed. To that end, Sjonna and the TSET HC team work closely with Laura Beebe, an epidemiologist with the OUHSC to get consistent and accurate evaluations of our campaigns.

[Hopeful electronic/piano music ("[On Silver Wings](#)" by Ben Beiny)]

[23:06]

Laura Beebe: My name is Laura Beebe, and I'm a Professor of Epidemiology and the Chair of the Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology at the Hudson College of Public Health, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center.

I'm part of the team evaluating the health communications programs of TSET, which include the Shape Your Future program, Tobacco Stops With Me, and promotion of the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline. I also lead the evaluation efforts for the other TSET-funded programs, such as the helpline and the Healthy Living Program and the Health Systems Initiatives.

- C. Howell: Laura has been conducting applied research and evaluation in tobacco control for more than 25 years, so it's safe to say that she understands the science behind the evaluation process better than most. But still, it's a difficult metric to track; how do you put a number on public opinion? What's the gauge for effective storytelling?
- L. Beebe: So we use a number of different methods to evaluate TSET's health communication campaign strategies, and these include both quantitative and qualitative designs. Our evaluation focuses on tracking levels of program exposure, and then the subsequent changes in awareness that we can relate back to the program and its key messages. Through this evaluation, we look for opportunities to improve overall campaign strategies. So our evaluation methods – we seek to demonstrate accountability for TSET's investment. We use evaluation results to assess the effectiveness of these campaign messages and health education strategies to assess their sustainability, and then also the contribution to the evidence base. TSET's health communications evaluation results have been published in leading national journals. Their campaign development and evaluation results have been presented at national conferences and been the topic of a number of CDC webinars and toolkits.
- C. Howell: And being published in scientific journals is a big deal. Not only do we gauge our own effectiveness with the research, but we share a rulebook that the rest of the country can follow.
- L. Beebe: Overall, health communication campaigns have a strong evidence base. The evidence base for public health interventions is created based on the published literature, based on studies that are published in the peer-reviewed literature and then a review of the evidence across multiple studies. So anytime CDC comes out with recommendations or advances in terms of best practices, these recommendations are based on evidence that is produced across a large number of studies, and TSET, because of its investment in program development and especially in program evaluation and evaluation research, has contributed to this evidence base by publishing its results, by presenting results at national conferences. And so what we're learning here in Oklahoma about the impact of these campaigns and specific strategies is being disseminated and then, most importantly, translated into recommendations and best practices that we hope will improve public health across the US, and not just here in Oklahoma.
- C. Howell: So that's a great way to capture the interest of the public health field at large, but how do we know we're reaching the people in our communities who need our message the most?
- L. Beebe: I'll share an example from the evaluation of the Shape Your Future campaign. When TSET launched its Rethink Your Drink campaign aimed at increasing knowledge and awareness of sugar-sweetened beverages, our evaluation was able to demonstrate not just an increase in the benchmarks related to knowledge of the impact of sugar-sweetened beverages on different health outcomes, but we also observed an 18% decline in the proportion of Oklahoma adults who reported drinking sugar-sweetened beverages at least once per day. Being able to demonstrate changes in actual behavior is exciting, and two papers were published in the peer-reviewed literature highlighting these evaluation results.

A second example comes from the evaluation of the Tobacco Stops With Me campaign. The evaluation around this campaign has generated a large number of findings that have been used to improve strategies, establish accountability for the health communication campaign here in Oklahoma and demonstrate its effectiveness, as well as making contributions to the evidence base.

One of the greatest areas of impact for the Tobacco Stops With Me campaign that we observed related to increases in knowledge of the harm from secondhand smoke. And then as a result of that, an increase in support for smoke-free environments, specifically increased support for smoke-free bars and casinos. We were able to demonstrate through a really rigorous evaluation design for this specific campaign that exposure to the Tobacco Stops With Me campaign messages was significantly associated with these outcomes. These outcomes have been consistent across time. We've been able to demonstrate really the durability of the Tobacco Stops With Me messages in terms of their association with support for smoke-free environments.

C. Howell: Wow. Okay. Those are some impressive results. So we definitely make a mark, and one that's quantifiable at that. But we don't get a home run every time. Success comes from a long path of cumulative effort that builds over time—a lot of trial and error. We incorporate the evidence that shows what works, and when the evidence points to the contrary, we adapt.

L. Beebe: There are numerous examples of how TSET looks to the program evaluators to provide evidence in support of their decision-making process. And, on the other hand, if the evidence is lacking to support their decision making, my experience has been that TSET is very open to changing course based on evaluation results. It's not always positive. Evaluation results don't always show the kinds of results we want them to show. And TSET is open to that. TSET understands that that is also part of the process of ensuring that the work that they do is the most effective, the most cost-effective, and has the potential to create the most impact in Oklahoma.

[“[On Silver Wings](#)” reprise (stem 5)]

C. Howell: It's not easy to change an individual's ingrained habits, let alone the habits of an entire state, but TSET is up to the challenge. Focusing on long-term change can be discouraging at times because the results are rarely immediate. But better health outcomes **do happen** over time, thanks in part to TSET Health Communication, and seeing concrete impacts like our encouraging evaluation results are inspiring.

L. Beebe: You know, this has been such an exciting part of my career as a researcher being involved with TSET's programs, evaluating TSET's programs. It's really one of the things that I've enjoyed most about my career as a researcher. It's not often that in public health research we see the very immediate impact of our work, and through the evaluation of TSET's health communication campaigns we have, in many cases, seen evidence that demonstrates how the work that we are doing, the work that TSET is doing, is really making a difference for Oklahomans.

[31:40]

J. Tyree: Each department within TSET uses its experience and expertise to improve the health of Oklahomans over the long run from a different angle. The Health Communication team is just one piece of this concerted effort, and I am happy to be a part of what keeps it going.

C. Howell: I really am, too. It's a privilege to be part of a group of creators and storytellers dedicated to creating lasting positive change in Oklahoma. If you would like more from the HC team, you can check out some of our media campaigns at stopswithme.com and shapeyourfutureok.com, and, as always, you can listen to all of our previous podcast episodes on our website at tset.ok.gov/podcast.

J. Tyree: Be sure to follow us on Facebook [@OklahomaTSET](https://www.facebook.com/OklahomaTSET) to stay up to date, and thank you for tuning in. Until next time, this is James Tyree –

C. Howell: And Cate Howell –

J. Tyree: Wishing you peace –

C. Howell: – and Better Health.

[Theme music]

[33:00]