



**Communication
for
Change**

**Pretesting
Communication Materials**

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Pretesting Communication Materials

What Is Pretesting?

Pretesting means field testing communication materials before they are produced or printed. By interviewing the audience, the materials are meant for, we find out if they are understood, i.e., if the message or idea is conveyed in the way it was intended. We also find out if the audience likes the materials.

Posters, Flipcharts, Flashcards, pamphlets, Handbooks, Radio programmes, Video programmes or Film are some of the materials that can be pretested.

Testing, e.g. A flipchart (a series of pictures making up a story or a sequence of instructions of how to make something, eg. Rehydration solution for children with diarrhoea) means taking the materials to the target audience when the materials are in a rough state, e.g. Pencil drawings. The idea is to test while it is still possible to change the materials, depending on the audience's reaction.

Pretesting may have to be done several times. If a flipchart is tested, and the suggestions from the audience have been used to make a new version until you have a material that the audience like and understand well.

What Kind Of Questions Can Pretesting Answer?

Through pretesting, you can find out how well you communicate with your audience in terms of:

Do they like the materials?

Are they used to abstraction of ideas, or do they mostly think in concrete terms?

Do they understand symbols?

Do they get the message right away, or are they confused by the way things are portrayed, or by unnecessary details?

Are they familiar with pictures in series – do they connect the pictures in e.g. a flipchart with each other, or do they interpret each picture separately?

Do they see the relevance of the picture of situation portrayed to their own lives and their own needs?

Does any part of the picture embarrass people?

How much experience do they have in being taught with pictures? Based on this, what is realistic to expect that they will understand?

What significance is attached to the different colours?

Why Pretesting?

Why is it necessary to get answers to the above questions?

Because if we don't, we may waste money, time and resources. And even worse – we may prevent the audience from sharing ideas that may help them improve their lives. We may communicate negative ideas and messages.

Communication materials are most often developed by urban, educated, modern, comparatives well-off, healthy men who are surrounded by visual stimulation. While materials are meant most often for rural, illiterate, conservative, comparatively poor, relatively unhealthy people – largely women – who live in villages with limited exposure to posters or other visual stimuli.

This situation contributes significantly to communication gaps – i.e. – the two groups (the development workers and the villagers) see things very differently. Unless planners verify their ideas and visuals with their audiences, things can go very wrong. There are sufficient examples of this in development. There also exist projects where a dialogue was started between development workers and villagers about ideas and the communication materials – and where, as a result, villagers have implemented new ideas that fit their environment, beliefs and culture.

Pretesting is a cost effective way to prevent large, expensive disasters. If 10,000 copies of a teaching poster are sent out to all the health workers in the country, and you find out later that villagers do not understand or accept the poster, you have made an expensive mistake. If, instead, you pretest the poster, discover

the mistakes, make the changes, test it again until people understand and accept it, you can be fairly sure that the teaching poster might be a useful communication aid for the health workers. The expense of the testing is very small compared to the cost of a ten thousand copy failure.

By going to the audience to ask their opinions and suggestions, organizations and projects gain credibility. People are more likely to listen if they have been listened to first.

Presenting sets a healthy tone for a project and the people they are working for and with. It takes the assumption that the “planners know it all” and puts it where it belongs – in the waste paper basket. This then opens up a dialogue with the audience or community and makes the planners listen, and brings the project managers to communicate with the audience. Pretesting implies a willingness to fit the project to the situation in the field, and a concern for the job and people. It leads to a gradual improvement in communications and results in projects and materials that are most appropriate to communicate.

Where the materials have been pretested, there is a greater possibility that feedback will be used – whether negative, positive or mixed.

How To Pretest

This chapter deals with the practical side of pretesting – what you have to do before

going to the field, when you are in the field and when you return.

Preparation before going to the field

For each of the communication materials you are going to test, you need to know with whom you are going to test (target audience), and what you want to find out (the objectives of the materials).

The target audience can be mothers, fathers, grandparents, children or health workers, etc., or several of these groups. Then, you need to know what kind of effect the materials are expected to have the audience: is it supposed to inform people, instruct them in a skill, motivate them or anything else?

Most of the time, the materials will be designed to be used by an extension worker. He or she will explain the pictures to the audience. Thus, when pretesting concentrates on the pictures only, you are putting them to a touch test. However, the better the pictures are at conveying a message about themselves, the more effective they will be as teaching tools: when the extension worker explains the topic, the audience can then give all their attention to the teaching, rather than trying to find out what the objects in the picture area are.

When you know the intended effect of the materials on the audience, you can formulate your questions. It is important to be clear about what you are trying to find out. For example, if you have a poster with a picture of a mother feeding her child vegetables and rice, construct the questions so that the interviewer does not

stop until he or she has got the right answer, or has fully found that the respondent does not understand the picture fully. If the first question is “what do you see in this picture” and the respondent says – “A mother and a child”, the pretester has to know that he or she has to ask more questions. This may seem very elementary, but it is surprising how many pretesters stop at just that single question.

Decide how you are going to record the answers – will you use a fixed questionnaire, or basic instructions and discussions with the pretesters before they go to the field? The best way to find out what works and what does not, is by trying various methods.

How long does it take to pretest? This depends on how much material and how many people you are testing with. When estimating the time, allow time for finding respondents, establishing rapport, and for refusals.

You will have a better idea of how to calculate the time after conducting and observing some tests with different kinds of materials in the field.

In the field

This section will give you advice on interviewing techniques, and on the possible effect of your attitudes and behaviour on the results of your work.

Establish social setting: where you ask the questions is almost as important as how you

ask them. Try to find a place where you will not be disturbed by other people. It is worth some time and effort finding the best place for the interview.

Establish a rapport: The introduction to the pretesting interview is very important as it will set the tone for the discussion with your respondent by motivating him or her to giving you their time and opinions about your communication materials. Motivate them so that they see the need and usefulness of what you are asking them to do. If you make them feel that you are asking them because they are the "Experts" on the subject you are testing – they know e.g. what their babies suffer from and how they could learn a new technique, they may listen to you more attentively. If you could also make them see how their suggestions can improve the materials to become good teaching tools to help them and their neighbours learn more easily, they will most probable agree to be interviewed and take an interest in the task as well. Your guideline should be: most villagers relate to things and people that are close to them in distance and life style. If you want them to cooperate, you have to relate to those things rather than to concepts and projects outside their experience.

Let people touch the materials, don't treat your respondents like children. Remember, you are testing the materials, not the people. If you want good results, treat people with respect.

Encouraging people to talk: most people will never have been asked to comment on educational pictures before, and what you may interpret as lack of understanding or reticence, may just be hesitation in the face of a new situation.

Some Golden Rules in Pretesting

Never make your respondent feel stupid. Do not argue with or contradict what your respondent says.

Do not interrupt. Let the respondent talk, and do not let them feel they have said something wrong.

Be neutral, encourage people to talk, to expand on their statements, to explain how they see things and why they see it this way.

Do not show your feelings and opinions – it is their feelings and opinions you are after. This is a real art, and it requires sensitivity.

When pretesting, resist the temptation to teach. You are collecting information, and if you do a good job, it will help those whose job it is to teach.

When pretesting, it is advisable to take only one or two different materials. If you take too many, you will have different keeping the reactions separate. Try not to test more than one material per respondent.

There are two main types of questions people ask

in interviews – open-ended, and leading questions. Pretesting uses open-ended questions, with only few exceptions. The way you ask the questions will determine the answer. Become familiar with the different types of questions and 'listen' to yourself when you are conducting the interview. Open ended questions are asked to get people to express what they think, without providing a lead or clue to what the answer might be.

It is common when asking for information to pose questions like "Do you think this is a healthy woman?" or "Do you think this is a village?" The danger in asking such questions is that one cannot discover what the respondent thinks. The respondent has been led to the answer we want them to give – usually a confirmation of our own opinion about the picture. Questions like this are called leading questions. Leading questions should be avoided in pretesting.

People you interview will most often be unfamiliar with being interviewed, and also with the kind of materials you are discussing with them. Therefore, they may hesitate to answer at first. It is very tempting to ask leading questions to 'fill in the gaps', instead of waiting for them to answer. It is also possible that they have simply not understood the question, but do not want to ask you to repeat it.

Sometimes it is necessary to ask several questions about a picture before a satisfactory

interpretation – or lack of such – of the picture can be obtained. Probing essentially continues the posing of open-ended questions and follows up on respondents' responses.

A good interviewer who knows what he is after (i.e. he or she has defined carefully the objectives of the communication materials), can continue to ask questions like this until he or she gets to the 'heart' of the matter.

Always let a respondent know that he or she has been of help. Tell him or her again what you are going to use the information for, and how his or her response will help improve the materials. Never abuse people's time or their willingness to help. Pretesters should work in pairs, if at all possible. One person to conduct the interview, the other to write down the questions and the answers. The most important thing is to record the answers properly, but if the questions are also written down, this can be a good tool to improve the interviewer's techniques. Also, by writing down the questions, you will get a better idea of how much you can trust the results of the interview – if several leading questions were asked, and sensitive issues were raised at an early stage, the results of the interview have to be analyzed very carefully. The answers may not be valid. If only answers were recorded, these mistakes may be difficult to detect. Your analysis of the results may thus be based on wrong information. It would be a good idea to write out some of the basic questions when planning the interview. With such a list, the recorder can remind the

interviewer if some major points are forgotten.

Testing With The Users Of Communication Materials

When testing materials with the users, e.g. Field workers in health or agriculture, you are usually testing two different things: The teaching skills of the users and the comprehension of the pictures by the audience (usually the villaers). This is because the results of the testing skills, you may recommend of action: when you test teaching skills, you may recommend training courses for the field workers or more effective use of visual aids. When you test for the comprehension of the pictures you may recommend changes in the communication materials.

Where And With Whom To Pretest

Communication materials and ideas should usually be tested with several different people, depending on the target group and users. Materials should be tested with the target group for whom they are intended, or with people close to the target group. If you test the material with your colleagues only, you have a very little chance of finding out what the real problems of the materials are. Discussion with colleagues is of course, a good place to start the process, but if that is also where it stops, it is of not much use.

Sometimes it is very tempting to test the materials with people who pick up the ideas quickly, and can give you good suggestions on how to improve the materials. However, you should bear in mind that even if this group is

important, especially because they normally give many suggestions (though keep in mind that if they are very well educated and different in many ways from the farmers and the mothers you try to communicate with, their suggestions may not work, so pretest them as well). Always test your materials with the weakest link of the chain, i.e. those with the least education. The poorest sector of your audience, the ones with little or no education, limited exposure to the outside world (i.e. outside their village) the ones trying to make a living from subsistence farming – they are the ones who may most need assistance from your project. If they are the ones who may most need assistance from your project. If they do not understand your communication materials, your field workers will be in trouble, and the audience will not learn anything. It is much more time, but it is an important part of your work. If they can understand the materials, more educated ones can also understand them.

Testing can be done with individuals and / or groups, depending on the situation and on the purpose of the test. If you test with groups, you will find that people respond more easily, and that there is always somebody in the group who will give and understand suggestions.

When Should You Pretest

Pretesting should be done as early as possible in the production of communication materials. The first test should ideally be

done when the materials are in a very rough stage, e.g., pencil sketches of ideas. The reason for testing them at this stage is that as neither much time or energy has been invested in the materials, it may be easier to make changes. People you test with may also be more interested and willing to make suggestions and give critical comments if they see the materials in the draft stage. People are less likely to criticize something that is already printed, or something that looks very elaborate and fancy. Testing at an early stage can be done in a location fairly close to where you work. If you test at an early stage, you will have time to make the necessary changes, and test the materials based on the suggestions, before they are produced. In some instances, especially when you start pretesting, you may have to go out five or six times before you are satisfied that your audience understands the materials. However, once you get more experience in testing, you will get a better feel for what different kinds of people like and understand, and the time needed for pretesting will be less.

Start your pretesting as early as you can, and continue testing at different stages of the process – each time you have made changes in the materials based on suggestions from the field. If you allow this procedure, you will learn more, and your superiors will not force you to produce before you are ready.

Check Your Communication Reception Ability

If you are interested in determining how well you listen as a matter of habit, answer the following questions. This 'test' is easy to 'beat', and if you like to cheat, go right ahead but do not be fooled by your listening ability. Just answer 'yes' or 'no'.

1. Do you locate yourself in the room so that you are certain you can hear clearly?
2. Do you listen to the underlying feelings as well as words?
3. Do you disregard a speaker's appearance and look only to the ideas he may have to present?
4. Do you 'pay attention': do you look at a speaker as well as listen to what he has to say?
5. Do you allow for your own prejudices and feelings as you evaluate what a man has to say?
6. Do you keep your mind on the topic continuously and follow the train of thought being presented?
7. Do you try consciously to estimate the logic and the rationality of what is being said?
8. Do you restrain yourself (you do not interrupt or stop listening) when you hear something you believe to be wrong?
9. In discussion, you are willing to let the other fellow have the last word?

10. Do you try to be sure that you are considering the other person's viewpoint before you reply, answer or make a rebuttal?

Some suggestions for being an effective communicator

Till now we have discussed what is communication, the purpose of communication, the process of communication, elements of communication and barriers to effective communication. Let us now share some hints that would help you to become an effective communicator. Most of these have been derived from the preceding content.

- The language you use should be familiar to the person(s) you are talking with.
- The choice of words (vocabulary) used by you should be such that can be understood by person(s) you are communicating with.
- Speak loudly enough for everyone to hear properly.
- Your pronunciation should be such that it is understood and accepted by the listeners.
- *See that your expressions and gestures match your words.* Your reactions and expressions are more truthful indicators of your feelings than the spoken words.

- Also look for reactions of persons you are communicating with. Watch for their changing expressions, gestures and non-verbal clues as these would give you some idea about how they are reacting.

It may have happened that during your course of work,, while talking to a person you find that he/she begins to look disinterested. Yet when you ask whether the persons is tired or bored, the person would respond by a 'No'. However despite the person's denial, the dominant impression that you retain is that he/she is no longer interested or attentive despite the verbal denial. It would be a good idea to introduce an interesting and attention-attracting element in your presentation at this stage.

Communication is *sharing*. If you share something personal about yourself, it can encourage others to become more open. This then establishes a bond for better understanding.

For example, discussing your own personal problems and how you managed or failed to managed these problems makes the other individuals feel more free to discuss their problems.

An Episode

A Health Worker worker, while discussing management of aggression in children with mothers, told them how she had curbed aggressive, resorting to physical violence whenever he was refused any

favour. So she put a chart paper on display at home with names of both her children on it. And at the end of the day she stuck red or black "bindi" to indicate good and bad behaviour respectively, against their names. She also told her children that at the end of every week a child with 5 red bindis or more would be rewarded. This helped the aggressive child to improve as he did not want black bindis displayed against his name.

The mothers felt close to the worker because she disclosed a problem (as lso its management) she had faced with her child.

This helped to build the trust which is the first step in effective communication.

- *Listen to other without criticism or comment.* Judgements like "You should not have done this." "put people on the defensive. Then they desist from expressing what is in their heart or mind; they will no longer express their opinions freely. You must listen with an unbiased, open mind.

Suppose in a meeting the mothers shared that they beat their children to instill discipline in them. If your react "Oh no! children should never be beaten!, the mothers would immediately become defensive and start justifying their action. The entire meeting time may end up in each one trying to prove the other wrong.

On the other hand, you may say, "Yes, when children get bothersome, even I feel like hitting out but this is not the solution. The children will then get immune to the beatings. Let us discuss other ways by which we can manage children...".

This will help their own behaviour pattern besides that of their children. They will be more willing to see from other perspectives.

- *Do not display you authority or knowledge excessively, for then, the others tend to get defensive.*

For example, suppose on entering the class you notice a puddle of spilled water. If you aggressively ask children who did it, the probable reply would be silence or the child who spilled water may say, "mayank pushed me while I was drinking water and the water spilled. It did not do it myself". This is a typical defensive behaviour. Instead, if you say "Don't you think that the class room is looking dirty? Can we sit and learn in a dirty class room?" The children will probably shout 'No' in chorus and clamour to clean up the mess without even your asking them to do so.

As a good communicator always try to *reduce the defensive behaviour* in other. This promotes better communication.

- *Be sensitive to the reaction of the audience towards you and your style of communication.*

If you sense their reaction to be negative, then introspect and reflect upon yourself, and see where you may be making mistakes. For example, if you feel that most people around you find you to be domineering and snobbish. You must try to tone down your behaviour and cultivate politeness.