

Messages can trigger the opposite of their desired effect—but you can avoid communication that backfires

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Credit: Yan Krukau from Pexels

The best graduation speeches dispense wisdom you find yourself returning to long after the graduation tassels are turned. Take the feel-good life advice in Baz Luhrmann's song to a class that graduated 25 years ago. Only on a recent relisten did I realize it also captures one of the research-based [strategies I teach](#) for avoiding communication that backfires.

The tip is hiding in plain sight in the song's title, "[Everybody's Free \(to Wear Sunscreen\)](#)." Communication aimed at promoting a certain behavior can have the opposite effect when the message is perceived as a threat to individual autonomy.

Health campaigns frequently use strongly worded messages that end up backfiring. For example, strongly worded messages promoting dental flossing made people [angry and more likely to resist](#) flossing their teeth. Coercive alcohol prevention messages, with language like "any reasonable person must acknowledge these conclusions," [instead increased alcohol consumption](#). In contrast, the wording of the title "Everybody's Free (to Wear Sunscreen)" is less likely to backfire by emphasizing liberty of choice.

Research reveals lots of reasons why well-meaning attempts to inform, persuade or correct misinformation go awry. Despite the ubiquity of backfires, formal instruction about why they happen and how to avoid them is rare. The omission inspired my new book, "[Beyond the Sage on the Stage: Communicating Science and Contemporary Issues Effectively](#)," which translates scholarship from across disciplines into practical strategies that anyone can use to improve communication.

When new info challenges your identity

Backfires are often a response to communication of unwelcome information.

In addition to threats to autonomy, information can be unwelcome because it appears to conflict with how you think about yourself. Consider a study that asked people to read a message about genetically modified foods. Participants for whom purity, health and conscientiousness of their diet was an important part of how they defined themselves had [more negative attitudes after reading a message](#) intended to refute their views about GM food. Those who did not have a strong dietary self-concept did not react negatively to the message.

The same resistance can rise up when you're confronted with something counter to the beliefs of a group you feel a strong affiliation with. Emotional and identity attachment to a group such as a [political party](#) can cause people to [subjugate their own values to align with the group](#), a phenomenon called cultural cognition. Reactions to messages about climate change often [exemplify this phenomenon](#).

Against the backdrop of protests and an impending election, communication breakdowns are increasingly [blamed on political polarization](#), with more than a hint of fatalism. But the current heavy focus on ideological differences serves only to fuel a [vicious cycle that amplifies them](#). To halt the cycle, the focus needs to shift away from the differences. Divides are not always what they seem, and even when they are, there are often ways to bridge them.

Every person contains multitudes

Encouragingly, a study recently published by the Pew Research Center found that just 11% of Americans consider it very or extremely important that they get their news [from journalists who share their political views](#). Less than 40% of Americans said that it was even

somewhat important. The study is a reminder that we are all complex mixes of identities, and those distinct identities can offer fruitful starting points for a conversation.

As the various identities within people interact, the context can bring a particular identity to the fore. For example, a study that examined the [importance of voters' identity as parents](#) revealed that when thinking about their children, people were more willing to oppose the policies of their own political party. "Animal lover" is another example of an identity that researchers have time and again seen relegate party identity to the background.

Therefore, appealing to a shared identity is a strategy for bridging the divide.

Another strategy is to make it safe to go against the group without damaging an individual's connection to it. For example, people may act anonymously, which is what happened during the pandemic when some people reportedly [chose to wear disguises](#) when getting their COVID-19 vaccine.

Accidentally conveying what you don't mean

As in the case of threats to autonomy, the language you choose can minimize backfires caused by threats to group affiliations. People may agree that a proposed action is sound and consistent with their party's beliefs [but still reject it](#) if it contains even small polarizing cues.

Triggers, such as words associated with the opposing party such as "tax" for a conservative or "deregulation" for a liberal, lead people to judge that their party would reject a policy. The fix is to remove both real and perceived threats to group identity by using party-neutral language.

Surprisingly, communication need not be threatening or unwelcome to

backfire. It can happen when communication contains hidden unintended messages or when it inadvertently makes an undesired behavior seem normal. For example, [messages from a utility about reducing energy use](#) caused low-energy users to consume more energy when their consumption was compared with others, and [anti-littering posters](#) emphasizing the extent of the problem increased littering.

Another intuitive communication strategy that backfires is presenting information in a myth-versus-fact format. You've probably seen this format used in communications aimed at debunking myths about health, science, technology, culture and more. Yet, research demonstrates that the "state-and-negate" format makes it more likely people will remember myths as facts. A [facts-only approach improves retention](#) of the correct information.

Research finds where instincts lead you astray

"Everybody's Free (to Wear Sunscreen)," originally [penned as a newspaper column by journalist Mary Schmich](#), doesn't tell graduates to trust their instincts, but that is commonly dispensed commencement advice.

The research demonstrates that when it comes to effective communication strategies, trusting your instincts can lead you astray. The same research provides insight into why you may instinctively react in certain ways to some messages.

So, if I were to offer this year's graduates just one tip for the future, I would encourage them to check their [communication](#) instincts against evidence-based recommendations. I would call my speech "Everybody's Free (to Beat Backfires)."

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