

# health communications communications specialist



## Communications Specialist Checkpoint

Are you a creative and resourceful person?

Are you comfortable working in all aspects of the media?

Would you enjoy going into local communities to disseminate information about health programs you have designed?

If so, read on

## A TRUE TALE

It was strictly by chance that Thomas Valente, PhD, came to work in the field of public health. He began his student career as a math major at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia. “My program was in theoretical mathematics so I never took a statistics class, which, when you consider it, is quite unusual for someone in this field.” He now believes it was actually fortuitous he chose math. “To work well in health communications,” he says, “you need to understand prevalences and incidences of diseases as well as determinants of outcomes. Formal training in math theory is good preparation for such work.”



Thomas W. Valente, PhD

Dr. Valente received his master’s degree in mass communications from San Diego State University and went on to the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California (USC), where he received his PhD in Communication. He believes his thesis, *Mathematical Models of the Diffusion of Innovation*, a well-known theory in public health, earned him his first job as an evaluation officer at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Dr. Valente’s wife, who is a native Californian, eventually wanted to move back to the West Coast. At that time, USC was looking for someone to direct its new Master of Public Health program. Dr. Valente got the job. Today, he is the Director of the MPH program in the USC School of Medicine and an associate professor in the school’s Department of Preventive Medicine.

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## Profiling the job

Effective public health communication encourages people to change certain attitudes, beliefs or behaviors so that they adopt better health practices and ultimately improve their health. Such lifestyle changes, however, do not

always come easily. “Given the option to change or not, most people will opt for the status quo,” says Dr. Valente. “Typically, motivators and stimulants are needed to successfully alter habits.”

Four of the most useful channels for public health communication are interpersonal communications, print publications, electronic communications and mass media. Interpersonal communications programs consist of the training of counselors and providers as well as the recruitment of lay health advisors to conduct associated outreach activities. Print publications consist of flyers, brochures, billboards, newspaper advertisements and many other types of printed matter. Electronic communications are increasingly being used to send messages to targeted and general lists of people, and the Internet now contains numerous web sites devoted to health information. The mass media consist of advertising campaigns, films, music and television, where health messages embedded in entertainment educate consumers.

Entertainment-education, often referred to as “Enter-Educate,” is a health communication strategy that uses entertainment media to inform audiences about health issues. Through street plays — or street theater — where “the world is the stage,” the message is carried to the target population by way of vignettes performed in public arenas. For example, an Enter-Educate program initiated in Peru featured a 20-minute play, acted by local citizens, to promote modern contraceptive methods to young couples. In the play, “Ms. Rumors” feeds incorrect information to a young couple that wants to wait to have children, but is interrupted constantly by a pharmacist and others who present the correct information in an entertaining way. The troupes travel through cities and towns in a parade, gathering their audience as they go. Eventually they stop, raise a small backdrop and put on the performance. At each performance, counselors are available to answer questions before and after the play. Approximately 200,000 people saw street theater performances in Lima and in other cities and provinces of Peru during the Enter-Educate program.<sup>2</sup> This reproductive health communication campaign was run by APROPO (Support to Population Programs), a Peruvian non-governmental organization, and supported by USAID, with technical assistance provided by the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs. “Health communications programs need to be developed appropriately for both the successful delivery of their messages and culturally for the audience they serve,” says Dr. Valente. “The Peruvian street play program was a splendid example of a health communication tailored ethnically for its



**Did you know?**  
Soap operas taught an estimated 48% of their 38 million regular viewers something about diseases and how to prevent them, a 1999 CDC Healthstyles Survey revealed. Over one-third of viewers took some action as a result.<sup>1</sup>

audience and designed as well to reach a market which does not necessarily have access to electronic media sources.”

Other entertainment media, such as theater, film, radio and television soap operas have been a common form of entertainment-education in developing and developed countries for the promotion of family planning, reproductive health and female empowerment.

Recently, the popular television series *ER* inserted spots about contraceptive use into their program. One *ER* episode addressed contraception through a storyline about a character who asked physicians and nurses in the emergency room what to do to prevent pregnancy. The vignette lasted only three minutes, and the information dispensed about



birth control pills took only 20 seconds of that time. But a follow-up viewer survey, underwritten by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation in Menlo Park, California, showed a 17 percent rise in *ER*-viewers’ awareness of a woman’s options for preventing pregnancy.<sup>3</sup> Globally, similar campaigns are underway. A production company in Uganda recently ran a 13-part television drama focused on helping young adults make health decisions about family planning. In Ethiopia, a radio serial drama used characters and a storyline to encourage young adults to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS.

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Another integral yet distinct concept in public health communications is “social marketing” — the planning and implementing of programs designed to bring about social change. While the consensus is that social marketing emphasizes non-tangible ideas and practices, Dr.

Valente views social marketing as still more effective when product-based. “But,” he says, “the types of products I refer to are those which improve health-related behavior, like condoms.”

Communication is not only about creating programs. Successful practice in the field also mandates that you evaluate the programs you have created. “To deliver effective results, practitioners must constantly measure what works and what does not work,” says Dr. Valente. “Pre- and post-program surveys of the target audience are the minimum evaluation needs.” For example, if the California Department of Health wanted to evaluate an anti-tobacco campaign, it would select a random sample of the state population, and then interview the sample about their smoking behaviors, attitudes and perceptions about smoking. After the campaign was broadcast, the sample would be interviewed again to determine if their attitudes or behaviors had changed and if those changes were prompted by the campaign. Mass media programs can also be evaluated through the more rigorous methodology of longitudinal studies set up to track people’s knowledge, attitudes and practices over specified periods of time.

### A day in the life

As director and administrator of the MPH program within the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine, Dr. Valente divides his time among three main activities: administrative duties, public health research and teaching. Communication is central to all three of those areas — and to the very notion of public health, he says. But what does a day in the life of a public health communications specialist look like? Dr. Valente describes the daily schedule of a communications specialist supervising a pregnancy prevention project managed by a state health department.

When he arrives at his office in the morning, the latest statewide epidemiological studies of teenage pregnancy are on his desk. To get this information out to the media in the most efficient way, the specialist holds a staff meeting to discuss and brainstorm the talking points the department wants to see in print, on television and on the Internet. The team also discusses how best to get their message out directly to the public, and through the health centers themselves. In both cases, Dr. Valente notes, complicated research data and results must be transformed into engaging and relevant lay language.

In the afternoon, the communications specialist meets with health workers from different districts, as well as community workers, leaders and volunteers, who may include Girl Scout troop leaders, school nurses and members of the county board of health. He also works on creating a program that



**Did you know?**  
Social marketing was formalized in the 1970s when Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman realized the same marketing principles used to sell commercial products could be used to influence human behavior. <sup>4</sup>



*“To me, changing behavior is what health communications is all about.”*

Thomas Valente, PhD

addresses teen pregnancy through traditional methods such as access to health care and sexuality education. As part of this undertaking, the communications specialist creates a cadre of people in the field able to return to their health centers and make the same presentation to their peers.

That evening the communications officer addresses the local school board meeting on the subject of an adolescent sexuality program, offering assistance and guidance in implementing a program. The officer and aides distribute brochures to the school board and public that reinforce the messages.

“Public health is about using every possible avenue for educating the public,” says Dr. Valente. “Without communications — and communications professionals — public health as we know it couldn’t exist.”

## career at a glance

### Thomas W. Valente, PhD

- 2000–Present **Associate Professor** Department of Preventive Medicine, School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California
- 2000–Present **Member** Institute of Medicine Panel, “Assuring the Health of the Public in the 21st Century”
- 1991–2000 **Assistant to Associate Professor** Department of Population & Family Health Sciences, Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD  
**Director**, Health Communication Program

1 <http://www.cdc.gov/communication/healthsoap.htm>  
 2 [http://www.jhuccp.org/centerpubs/sp\\_9/pg26.stm](http://www.jhuccp.org/centerpubs/sp_9/pg26.stm)  
 3 [www.kff.org/content/archive/1358/ers.html](http://www.kff.org/content/archive/1358/ers.html)  
 4 <http://www.social-marketing.com/whatis.html>