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GRANTnews

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Messaging matters: Optimize your campaign with simple and persuasive phrasing

Strategic messaging continues to increase organ donor sign-ups at Departments of Motor Vehicles



You don't want your family to hurt.

Here's a way to help them heal.

SIGN UP TO BE AN ORGAN DONOR

Sample campaign poster

Photo credit: Michaela Mabry, DCI Donor Services, Inc.

Funded by a grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration's Health Systems Bureau Division of Transplantation, researchers in New Mexico conducted four studies to assess messaging in organ donation campaigns in Departments of Motor Vehicles (DMVs). The campaigns tested three messaging strategies, which ultimately showed that all three styles of messaging could be effective. However, the success of any attempt depended on the phrasing.

These results confirm that, with the right strategic messaging, DMVs remain an important venue for registering new organ donors.

It's All About the Messaging

The three messaging strategies evaluated were efficacy (eligibility), altruism (saving lives), and vested interest (family benefits). Appeals that focus on eligibility and saving lives to donate are common in organ donor campaigns. The third

messaging strategy, which highlights how organ donor registration can benefit family members, is less common and, according to lead author Professor Jason Siegel, underutilized.

“Appeals to family benefits need to be part of the canon of messaging strategies,” Siegel said. “It might inspire people who aren’t responsive to other approaches.”



*DMV location dressed with campaign material (left) and a sample poster used in the campaign (right).
Photos credit: Michaela Mabry, DCI Donor Services, Inc.*

Although the studies showed that all three types of messaging can increase donor registrations, success depends greatly on the phrasing of the message itself. The first two studies showed that messaging about family benefits did not lead to increased registrations—even with high exposure to campaign materials. However, when researchers simplified the same messages in a later study, they found that DMV visitors were more likely to register as organ donors after seeing them.

Developing Organ Donor Registration Campaigns that Work

The takeaway? Messaging matters.

“We don’t put enough importance on the messaging itself and pilot testing it,” Siegel said. “A campaign may succeed or fail, regardless of the context, based on the messaging used.”

Siegel also encourages people to use strategies that have been proven to work more than once and avoid drawing conclusions based on the results of a single study.

Strategies that work:

- **Keep it simple.** Phrasing can make or break a campaign regardless of strategy. Avoid overloading people with too much information.
- **Keep it local.** Tailor both messaging and the campaign's look and feel to match the interests and motivations of the local community.
- **Focus on messaging.** If possible, pilot test messaging to see what works for your target audience and adjust based on their responses.



Siegel's co-authors, Wayne Dunlap, Executive Director of New Mexico Donor Services, and Maria Sanders, Executive Director of the Peruvian American Medical Society (formerly with New Mexico Donor Services), stress that it is also important for organ procurement organizations to develop strong, pro-donation relationships with the Department of Motor Vehicles in their state. Sanders also has a message for DMVs across the nation.

"It is through you that we are able to save lives. We all win when we register new donors," she said.

You can read more about Siegel and colleagues' exciting research and see their campaign materials, including videos and posters in English and Spanish, at MVDdonorproject.org.

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