A How-to Guide to Anti-Corruption Messaging

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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

"The central message of the how-to guide is that to avoid wasting money, or distributing messages that have unwanted effects, it is essential to follow the 'three Ts': Tailor, Target and Test."

Corruption is often argued to be one of the biggest threats to both development and democracy around the world. This helps to explain why anti-corruption campaigns have been a constant feature of both foreign aid programming and civil society activity over the last 30 years. These anti-corruption campaigns usually have an awareness-raising component that involves producing messages about the harm that corruption can do to a mass audience. This is understandable as such messaging is one of the few tools policy makers have to try to influence the types of popular attitudes and behaviors that can sustain corrupt practices and frustrate anti-corruption efforts. Harnessing public opinion also promises to be an effective way to put pressure on political leaders and bureaucrats, and hence to promote broader reforms and practices that reduce the level of graft. There is growing concern, however, that

Buharian Culture Organisation signage in Nigeria

anti-corruption messages may be ineffective – or even do more harm than good – in part because they are not being tailored, targeted and tested to make sure they have the desired effect. Studies have even concluded that some anti-corruption messages may have the effect of encouraging apathy rather than activism and may actually encourage bribery.

Target Audience and Questions to be Answered

This guide is written for civil society groups, anti-corruption institutions, campaigners, practitioners, and donors. It draws on all of the key research that has been published to date to help them answer the following questions:

Is a messaging campaign the best option for your project/strategy?

What kind of messaging campaign would be most likely effective?

How can you make sure that messages have the desired effect?

What is the most reliable way to monitor and evaluate the impact of your campaign?

The central message of this how-to guide is that to avoid wasting money, or distributing messages that have unwanted effects, it is essential to follow the 'three ts': tailor, target and test. Messages must be carefully tailored to reflect what we know of social psychology and to give them the best possible chance of success. At the same time, messages should always be carefully targeted at a distinct audience because they can have different effects on different people. Finally, messages should always be tested before they are shared with the public to make sure that they don't backfire.

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2. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT ANTI-CORRUPTION MESSAGING SO FAR?

There has been a recent surge in research on the likely impacts and efficacy of anti-corruption messaging. As Table 1 shows, 14 main studies have been conducted across 10 countries, which have collectively tested 27 messages. The findings of these studies powerfully demonstrate the risk of deploying messages without prior testing. Strikingly, almost half (13) backfired or registered a negative, unwanted impact of some kind. To give one example, our study of anti-corruption messages in Lagos, Nigeria, showed that exposure to even positive messages designed to stress government progress or the support of religious leaders for clean governance initiatives increased the likelihood that individuals would pay a bribe in a "bribery game" played with real money (Cheeseman and Peiffer 2021). The collective findings from this substantial portion of the literature warn that untested messaging

may not only represent poor value for money spent, but it can also risk making the situation worse.

Of the half of studies that did not backfire, only three found that a message had the desired impacts – i.e., they encouraged individuals to refuse bribes, report corruption or support anti-corruption efforts in some other way. All the other messages that have been tested were found to have no real impact. It is important to note here that amongst those found to have no positive effect are two messages that were designed to emphasize framings – or themes – that were previously found to generate the desired impact in prior studies. This includes a message that corruption is a local issue (Peiffer and Walton 2022) and that citizens strongly condemn corruption (Agerberg, 2021; Cheeseman and Peiffer 2022 and 2022b, respectively, retested messages

Table 1. Summary of findings in anti-corruption messaging literature

STUDY	LOCATION	DOMINANT THEME OF MESSAGE(S) TESTED
Corbacho et al. (2016)	Costa Rica	Increasing rate of bribery in country
Peiffer (2017; 2018)	Jakarta	Grand corruption is endemic
		Petty corruption is endemic
		Government successes in anti-corruption
		Citizens can get involved in anti-corruption
Cheromoi & Sebaggala (2018)	Uganda	Negative consequences of corruption
Peiffer and Walton (2022)	Port Moresby	Corruption is endemic
		Corruption is illegal
		Corruption is against religious teachings
		Corruption is a 'local' issue
Kobis et al. (2019)	Manguzi	Bribery declined in region
Blair, Littman & Paluck (2019)	Niger Delta	Corruption is endemic/Celebrities report corruption
Hamelin, Nwankwo & Gbadamosi (2020)	Morocco	Awareness of corruption and 'beware of bribes'
Cheeseman and Peiffer (2021; 2022)	Lagos	Corruption is endemic
		Government successes in anti-corruption
		Corruption is against religious teachings
		Corruption steals tax money
		Corruption is a 'local' issue
Agerberg (2021)	Mexico	Citizens strongly condemn corruption
Cheeseman and Peiffer (2022b)	Albania	Corruption is endemic
		Citizens strongly condemn corruption
		Wealth is lost to other countries
Baez-Camargo et al. (2022)	Tanzania	Hospital staff do not accept bribes
Beesley & Hawkins (2022)[*]	Peru	Instance of grand corruption
		Instance of petty corruption
		Corruption has a positive impact
		Corruption has a negative impact

Note: Red indicates at least one unwanted effect; Amber indicates no impact/largely no impact across outcomes; Green indicates intended impact clearly achieved.

[*]*The authors tested whether mentioning a positive or negative consequence associated with corruption, as well as not mentioning a consequence also impacted on trust and donations to an anti-corruption NGO.*

"The findings of these studies powerfully demonstrate the risk of deploying messages without prior testing."

with these themes). The largely negative conclusions of the most recent attempts to test these messages suggest that what works in one context may not work in another. In other words, where anti-corruption messaging is concerned there are no silver bullets that can be relied on to always deliver the desired outcome.

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Overall, this poor track record is concerning, though not completely surprising. It is important to learn from the much longer experience of messaging around behavior change in other policy areas—such as public health, where a wider body of literature has also highlighted the potential for awareness-raising messages to be ineffective or to backfire (e.g. Greszczuk, 2020; Stead et al., 2019). Moreover, research on awareness-raising of other 'social bads' like gender-based violence, the protection of endangered environments, suicide prevention, drug use and even compliance with COVID-19 restrictions have repeatedly demonstrated that strategic communications campaigns can have unwanted effects (e.g. Paluck & Ball, 2010; Chambers et al. 2005; Ryoo & Kim 2021).

There are two important risks associated with messaging about corruption and other 'social bads'. First, messaging efforts may struggle to change how people think about corruption because it tends to be the type of issue that people already have strong feelings about (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Lenz 2009). Especially for those who already believe strongly that corruption is widespread, messaging may not change their minds and instead risks triggering and even reinforcing pre-existing beliefs that the problem is too big to solve. This can be problematic because one obvious implication of this belief is that it is not worth trying to resist, and so the rational thing to do is to participate in corruption.

> "Messaging efforts may struggle to change how people think about corruption, because it tends to be the type of issue that people already have strong feelings about."

Second, by highlighting the scale of the problem, 'social bads' awareness-raising messages risk explicitly or implicitly telling people that unwanted behaviors are widespread. In doing so, such messaging may unintentionally give the impression that problematic practices – such as paying a bribe – are actually socially acceptable.

Indeed, research on social norms has shown that hearing or being reminded that people like us are behaving in the 'wrong'

way can actually encourage us – often subconsciously – to do the same (Paluck & Ball 2010). Together, these risks help to explain why some anti-corruption messages have been found to backfire.

The risks of corruption fatigue and encouraging people to believe that unwanted behavior is widespread – and so more socially acceptable – helps to explain why some anti-corruption messages have been found to backfire.

3. HOW TO DECIDE IF MESSAGING IS FOR YOU

This issue poses particular challenges for civil society groups who spend much of their time trying to raise awareness of the problems of corruption. The challenges identified by the existing literature do not mean we should completely give up on anti-corruption messaging – indeed, shifting public opinion is often one of the only pathways we have to try to drive broader change. What it does mean, however, is that it is important to think about whether messaging is the best strategy for your project given the need to make best use of scarce resources. It is also important to work out how we can best make sure that the public is aware of the need to combat corruption without undermining their belief that it can be dealt with.

In other words, awareness-raising is a means to an end; it should be done for a clear and specific purpose, and not just for the sake of raising awareness. There is little evidence available that greater awareness alone results

in behavioral or attitudinal change. To work out whether a messaging campaign makes sense for your project, consider:

1. What your main aims are and what you think is needed to achieve them, and;

2. Who the audience is, and exactly what change you need to bring about in them.

3.1 Identifying your aims and appropriate strategies

It is important to start by being very clear about the aims of your engagement and what it will take to achieve them – what some would call your theory of change. Being specific about aims enables better interventions to be designed and enables more accurate monitoring and evaluation of a project's success. Some aims clearly suggest messaging will be a key ingredient of your project, such as explicit strategies to discourage citizens from offering bribes

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or to encourage citizens to put pressure on elected leaders to enact a given anti-corruption reform. Other kinds of anti-corruption work are unlikely to benefit substantially from broader awareness-raising, such as technical work with parts of the bureaucracy that are not public facing and are insulated from public pressure.

It often doesn't make sense to undertake awareness-raising as an isolated strategy as it is most effective when implemented in conjunction with other reforms and interventions.

In many cases, the emergence of a more critical or demanding public has been impactful precisely because it was combined, or aligned, with a wider range of interventions. For example, to effect far-reaching change it might be necessary to strengthen the ability of citizens to mobilize, enhance the willingness of the media to cover corruption issues and incentivize officials and leaders to respond to citizens' concerns. Recent research by Baez-Camargo (2022) on fighting corruption in a Tanzanian hospital and by Xiao, Scott and Gong (2022) on building public support for the Independent Commission Against Corruption in Hong Kong have shown that anti-corruption messaging can be particularly effective when it is part of a wider raft of mutually reinforcing strategies. This suggests that it may not make sense to undertake awareness-raising as an isolated strategy, and so the timing of public awareness campaigns should be designed to maximize synergies with other kinds of interventions.

Given this, it is important for anti-corruption campaigns to be aware of, and take advantage of, windows of opportunity when they arise. Changes of leader, for example, or specific crises that generate a sense within the political establishment that things need to change, can be harnessed to promote high-profile reforms, and then this progress can be used to give greater credibility to anti-corruption messaging. This approach has recently been used in countries such as Moldova and Zambia (NDI 2024), where new governments heavily emphasized anti-corruption themes before coming to power. In turn, this means it is important for donors and civil society anti-corruption efforts to be flexible and responsive to conditions on the ground.

Reality check: Is messaging the right tool to use?

When thinking about your aims and how to bring them about, it is important to be realistic both about:

- What can be achieved in terms of changing popular attitudes or behavior.
- What kind of impact these changes are likely to have on corruption and anti-corruption more broadly.

In doing so, it makes sense to consider how awareness-raising relates to broader theories of change in anti-corruption work and to the particular context in which you are working. In places where officials are not often investigated or punished for corruption, messaging may struggle to persuade people to report the corruption they encounter, for instance. In highly authoritarian countries, as another example, citizen opinion may have limited impact on political behavior. Similarly, in neo-patrimonial political systems in which citizens may overlook corruption committed by members of the same ethnic group, leaders may think they can escape censure even if public awareness about the impact of corruption increases.

It is therefore important to reflect on whether changing public opinion or behavior on its own will be enough to secure your desired outcome.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the aims of a campaign should be specific and focused both in terms of what you want to change and the audience. It is important to be specific about the exact change you need to realize because even effective anti-corruption messages rarely impact on every aspect of a citizen's understanding of corruption at the same time. It is therefore essential to work out whether you want to make citizens more likely to report corruption when they experience it, or more

determined to reject a bribe, or more willing to vote for an anti-corruption candidate or something else entirely. As well as enabling you to more accurately measure the impact of your campaign, clarifying these issues will enable you to more accurately tailor your message and target it to the right audience, as we discuss next.

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4. HOW TO TAILOR AND TARGET YOUR MESSAGES

Blanket anti-corruption messaging campaigns that are indiscriminately communicated to the public are unlikely to be effective. Research on strategic and public interest communications makes this clear as it finds that messaging is most likely to work when they resonate with audiences (Sanderson, 2018), and it is difficult to find a single message that will resonate in the same way and to the same degree with all people.

This means that the same anti-corruption message can be impactful for some but not for others. Indeed, recent research makes just this point: Denisova-Schmidt, Huber and Prytula (2016) found that messaging had different impacts depending on the audience. Similarly, Cheeseman and Peiffer (2022) found that messaging that worked for one segment of the population backfired for another.

"If awareness-raising does make sense for your project, it is critical to identify exactly who your audience is."

Getting to know your audience

To tailor a message effectively, communicators must understand their audience. It will be important for your campaign to learn more about:

- What does the target audience already know, believe and understand?

- How do they tend to feel about the topic of the message, anti-corruption, and the aims of messaging?

- Who in society do they trust and how will they perceive the institution or person delivering the message? (For more on the importance of messengers, see below).

- Are the values of the target audience aligned with the message?

- What is the best medium to use to reach the target audience? And how can the message best be tailored to that medium? Messages on social media take a very different format to those on the radio, for example.

- Will messaging put recipients on the defensive? It is generally important, for example, to avoid blaming and shaming the audience (For more on this see below).

In some cases, this data may be available already in pre-existing surveys and publications. If not, it may be necessary to conduct surveys, focus groups and interviews to be able to understand how citizens think about corruption – and how this varies between groups and regions. More details on how these methods can be used are provided in section 6.1.

4.1 Identifying your audience and the change you want to see

If awareness-raising does make sense for your project, it is critical to identify exactly who your audience is. The broader scholarship on public interest communications emphasizes the importance of defining a target audience as narrowly as possible and tailoring messages for specific audiences (Sanderson, 2018). The aims of an anti-corruption messaging strategy will help in defining a target audience and, as discussed later, message testing can help to

ensure that messaging is likely to work as intended for that target audience.

For the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in Hong Kong, the audience was adult citizens as the aim was to increase popular trust in ICAC and to promote citizen reporting, while for Baez-Camargo et al.'s (2022) project that aimed to reduce gift giving and bribery in a Tanzanian hospital and hospital staff, the audience was those using the hospital rather than the broader public. Understanding the target audience is key for effective tailoring and targeting. The box above lists additional

indicative questions that communicators may benefit from addressing when getting to know their audience.

To learn more about a target audience and to tailor messages effectively, survey data and focus groups can be used. Research on Albania, Moldova, Nigeria and Zambia (NDI 2024), for example, suggests that there may be pronounced differences in attitudes to – and experiences of – corruption between urban and rural areas, women and men, older and younger citizens and people from different ethnic groups, depending on the

country. This means that messages need to be targeted narrowly and carefully designed to ensure that they resonate with all sub-groups of target audiences.

Practitioners should also consider co-creating messages with members of the target audience like community leaders or civil society organizations. By working with representatives of a target audience, communicators may find it easier to enrich campaigns with narratives and real-world stories that resonate in the right ways for those they hope to influence.

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5. OVERARCHING DESIGN PRINCIPLES

While research on anti-corruption messaging has yet to point to a single messaging theme or strategy which will work for all, clear lessons have emerged which can help to inform the design of any campaign. These include three principles we have already discussed: design messages that 1) directly connect to the aims of your campaign; 2) will likely resonate with the target audience; and 3) are suitable for the medium of delivery you plan to use. In addition to these principles, the following six lessons can also help when designing anti-corruption messaging, whoever is the target audience.

Cote d'Ivoire billboard reads "It took away my wife."

5.1 Make sure messaging is clear, concise and consistent

Especially for messaging that involves story telling (e.g., films, radio shows or television), communicators should take care in ensuring the narrative is clear and the right message is being received. Testing messages on citizens in advance of a campaign can help to ensure that a message is understood as intended and avoid situations such as that which occurred in Cote d'Ivoire in the early 2010s. In an attempt to combat corruption, the then-government erected billboards around Abidjan with messages like 'It destroyed my region' and 'It killed my son'. Unfortunately, these messages were too vague to be impactful, and because of the color scheme used, many Abidjanais thought the billboards were in fact adverts for Orange, a mobile service provider (Economist, 2013).

5.2 Avoid 'negative' messaging about the extent of the problem

One of the clearest lessons emerging from research on 'social bads' messaging (including anti-corruption messaging) is that messaging campaigns should avoid focusing on the scale of the problem. This is an important point to underline because raising awareness to the scale or consequences of corruption is a common theme in anti-corruption messaging and often features the guidance of influential international bodies (e.g., UNCAC; United Nations, 2004). However, recent research strongly suggests that communicators should avoid emphasizing such themes. Messages that highlight the scale of the problem are now understood to be most at risk of backfiring by reinforcing beliefs that corruption is too big to solve and conveying to audiences that corruption is socially acceptable. Indeed,

Table 1 shows that of the six messages tested that emphasized the scale of corruption, four backfired while the other two were unimpactful.

5.3 Avoid blaming and shaming the audience

It is important that messaging is sensitive to how an audience sees itself. For this reason, campaigns should try to avoid conveying blame or pointing the finger at the audience. A messaging campaign in Nigeria came under scrutiny for this reason. In 2016, a new 'national reorientation campaign' was launched, entitled: "Change Begins with Me". This campaign aimed to raise the standard of ethics among ordinary Nigerians in

Cartoon by Mike Asukwo circulated in Nigeria

"Messaging campaigns should avoid focusing on the scale of the problem."

order to reduce popular engagement with corrupt practices. However, it appears to have ultimately been largely ineffective as an anti-corruption campaign. Audiences were put off by the campaign's emphasis on their (supposed) lack of ethics, and many felt that the campaign should have begun by emphasizing the need for change within the government, which was viewed as being a key source of the problem (Ayo-Aderele, 2016).

5.4 Consider using 'credible' positive messaging

Instead of emphasizing the problem, it might be more fruitful to focus on how things are changing for the better—for example, if bribery is decreasing or if there have been anti-corruption wins to celebrate. One of the most effective developments that can generate perceptions of credibility is if there are prosecutions of wrongdoing of individuals both within and outside of the government. This is not always possible, however, because in reality successful prosecutions may be rare, or may be limited to the government's opponents, and so not seen to be fully legitimate by the whole population.

Alternatively, some campaigns have attempted to strike a positive note by emphasizing the fact that most people tend to disapprove of corruption. In Agerberg's (2021) study in Mexico, a message emphasizing the fact that most of society

does not think bribery is justified had promising impacts. Exposure to the message reduced agreement that corruption was a basic part of Mexican culture and reduced willingness to bribe. According to Agerberg (2021), the most likely explanation is that learning that most people disapprove of corruption likely made participants more hopeful that corruption could be tackled, spurring optimism instead of pessimism.

Adopting these strategies is sometimes easier said than done, however, because positively toned messages must be credible for them to work. This may be particularly difficult to achieve when it comes to anti-corruption reforms in countries with recalcitrant governments.

It is also worth noting that research findings are mixed with respect to the several 'positive' messages that have been tested so far. For example, a message emphasizing government wins in the fight against corruption backfired in Jakarta (Peiffer 2018), while a message emphasizing that citizens disapprove of corruption in Albania – similar to the message deployed by Agerberg (2021) – did not have a positive impact (Cheeseman and Peiffer 2022b). It may be the case that these 'positive' messages failed to have the desired effect because they were not perceived to be credible by their audiences. Whatever the case, these mixed findings emphasize the importance of testing even positively toned messages before they are deployed.

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5.5 The messenger matters

Relatedly, the credibility and trust an audience has in the person or organization delivering a message is also important. Research on messaging campaigns designed to tackle other 'social bads' confirms that audiences are more likely to pay attention to and believe messaging delivered by a source they judge to be credible (e.g. Maclean, Buckell, & Marti, 2019). For messaging campaigns delivered or sponsored in some way by the government, this of course means that citizens are more likely to respond as intended when the government has made a credible commitment to challenge the corrupt status quo, as discussed above. The critical public reaction to the previously mentioned "Change Begins with Me" campaign in Nigeria helps to underscore this point. The first anti-corruption messaging campaign deployed

This Morocco billboard says "Beware of bribes."

in Morocco tells a similar story. Analysis of a large survey about the campaign suggests that it likely failed because the communicator—the government—was not trusted and because many of the messages were quite vague.

A more positive example, is the aggressive anti-corruption messaging campaign by ICAC in Hong Kong during the late 1970s and early 1980s, introduced above. This campaign appears to have been effective in successfully promoting trust in the agency and willingness to report corruption, in part because citizens could see clear evidence that ICAC was arresting and prosecuting corrupt officials (Xiao et al., 2022)

Aside from the government, messengers can also be experts, community leaders, peers or a combination thereof. To give another positive example, Baez-Camargo et al's (2022) anti-bribery and gift-giving/taking intervention in a hospital in Tanzania used the Medical Associati on of Tanzania, hospital management and staff champions within peer networks as messengers. As Table 1 reflects, the messaging strategy tested was found to be largely effective, and health workers rated the use of multiple messengers highly with "the support of the message by formal authority figures ... add[ing] credibility to the intervention" (Claudia Baez-Camargo, 2022, p.21).

5.6 If appropriate, articulate a clear call to action

If appropriate to the aims of the campaign, communicators should also consider what actions, if any, the audience could take after seeing or hearing the message. It stands to reason that messaging that does not give the audience any concrete recommendations
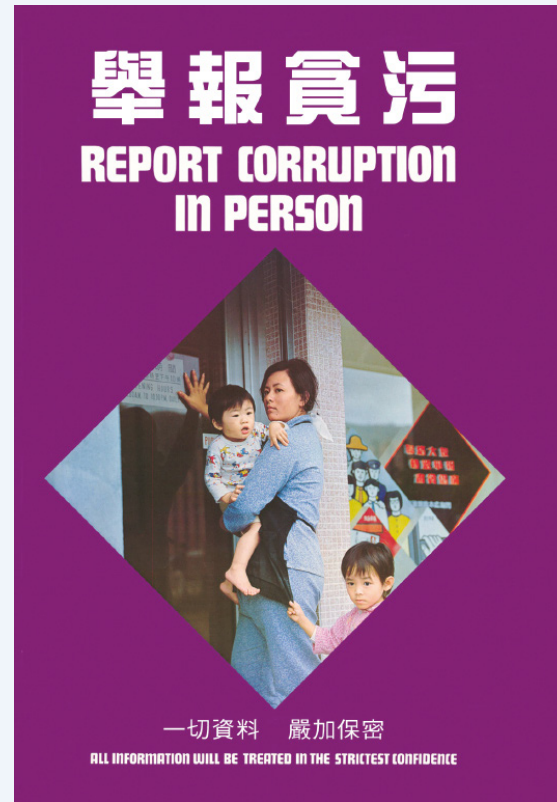
ICAC poster displayed in Hong Kong in 1970s

for action is less likely to encourage specific forms of behavior. It is also likely that messages that point to a meaningful action that can be taken – like where and how to report bribery – or that highlight solutions that are in place, have a better chance of avoiding instilling a sense of hopelessness in an audience. Prescribed actions, however, must also be seen to be credible ways to challenge or reject corruption. In other words, there is no use explaining where or how to report corruption in a message if the audience does not believe that anything useful will be done if they pursue this option.

"Messages that point to a meaningful action that can be taken – like where and how to report bribery – or that highlights solutions that are in place, have a better chance of avoiding instilling a sense of hopelessness in an audience."

6. HOW TO TEST

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many, if not most, anti-corruption messaging campaigns are not tested before they are deployed. However, given that research suggests that, in general, anti-corruption messaging is more likely to be unimpactful than it is to have the desired effect — and that the effects of messaging are very difficult to predict — using untested anti-corruption messaging campaigns is an extremely risky strategy. The importance of dedicating time and resources to testing messages before they are deployed cannot be overstated.

Testing is the only way communicators can check whether choices made over design and content will likely lead to desired impacts. Moreover, the results of testing will also help communicators learn more about their target audience. Given the large amounts of time and money spent on anti-corruption awareness raising every year, the relatively small investment required to test

the likely efficacy of messages represents excellent value for money.

6.1 Testing options

There are three main approaches that can be used to test or evaluate anti-corruption messaging: focus groups, surveys, and experiments. Each has distinct strengths and weaknesses, as set out below.

6.1.1 Focus groups

How does it work? Focus groups are conducted by gathering a small group (about six to 10 people) together to have a moderated discussion for an hour or so. For the purposes of anti-corruption message testing, the discussion would focus on reactions to proposed messaging content, a pre-designed message and/or the aims of a messaging strategy.

Strengths: Focus group discussions can generate rich information about what participants feel about a message, a messenger or other elements of strategy and have the potential to capture multiple perspectives.

Weaknesses: Given the intimate setting, participants may feel pressure to respond in ways that participants think researchers or others in the group want them to rather than report how they truly feel about a message. Also, these conversations can be greatly impacted by the dynamic of the group— for example, if one person dominates— which can make it difficult to know how all participants feel. Moreover, these discussions can take a lot of time but do not involve a lot of people, making it impossible to know if feedback is generalizable to a target audience. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, research suggests that messaging about corruption likely impacts attitudes subconsciously, and so individuals may not be fully aware of the true impact that a message is having and, as a result,

could unknowingly mis-represent the impact that messaging has.

Most appropriate for: In the early stages of designing a message, focus groups can be useful for making sure that a message's meaning is clear and for developing initial expectations around how different groups within a target audience might react to a message.

6.1.2 Surveys

How does it work? When surveys are used to test a public awareness-raising campaign, they usually involve asking people questions about an issue, a particular theme or the overall direction of a strategy. They can also be used to get to know more about a target audience.

Strengths: Surveys involve much larger samples of people than focus groups and can be designed to be representative of the target audience. Surveys can include multiple questions about messaging content, strategy and the target audience itself.

"The importance of dedicating time and resources to testing messages before they are deployed cannot be overstated."

Weaknesses: Compared to focus groups, surveys are less equipped to capture detailed information about beliefs and attitudes. Statistical analysis is required to analyze survey data, which not all organizations or institutions are able to do in-house.

Most appropriate for: A survey is best placed to gauge attitudes towards a given topic or strategy among a large group of people. Representative surveys can generate useful insights into the beliefs, values and attitudes of the target audience, all of which can inform a messaging strategy or campaign. Communicators should therefore consider consulting relevant existing survey data – which of course reduces costs – or deploying an original survey with the aim of learning about how the target audience feels and thinks about (anti-) corruption before a message is designed.

6.1.3 Experimental approaches

How does it work? Messages are often experimentally tested by exposing one group of people to a message and comparing their reactions to another group that was not exposed to it (the 'control' group). Experiments can be done in three main ways: 1) incorporated into a survey, which we discuss in greater depth in the next section; 2) in a 'laboratory' setting, which involves inviting participants into a controlled environment to gauge reactions to particular messages; or 3) in the 'field', which involves measuring reactions to messages trialed

in the 'real world'. The impacts of a new billboard, for example, can be tested by measuring attitudes to a range of anti-corruption issues in the community before and after it is put in place.

Strengths: It's only with an experimental approach that a systematic estimate of the impact of exposure to messaging can be made. Experiments can also be designed to test the likely efficacy of multiple messages at once. Finally, unlike surveys, **experiments can be designed to measure exactly how messaging impacts attitudes and behaviors** (for more details, see the next section). For example, experimental studies have examined whether exposure to messaging increases citizens' willingness to report corruption (Peiffer & Walton 2022), to donate to an anti-corruption NGO (Beesley & Hawkins, 2022) or even to pay a bribe (Cheeseman & Peiffer 2021).

Weaknesses: A careful research design and statistical analysis is needed to run an effective experiment, which may involve expertise that some organizations do not have in-house. Experiments of large target audiences also can be more expensive than running focus groups or a non-experimental survey.

Most appropriate for: An experimental approach is the only way to establish reliably and rigorously what impact a message has on a target population. As such, it is the most appropriate strategy for testing the impact of

individual messages, evaluating a messaging campaign and checking whether messages have differential impacts on different segments of the target audience.

6.2 What is the best testing strategy for you?

In practice, communicators will benefit from drawing on multiple approaches, and often the best designed campaigns will combine all three strategies identified above during the message policy cycle. Indeed, much of the research conducted on anti-corruption messaging has used elements of both surveys and experiments in their tests of messaging, and some also have used focus groups to inform the design of messages.

If your main aim is to make sure that the message you want to deploy works as intended, however, experimental approaches are the most suitable strategy to ensure

that a messaging campaign is good value for money and is unlikely to backfire. In this section we therefore provide a fuller description of one incredibly useful approach to testing anti-corruption messaging, which is a household-level, population-based survey experiment—or a survey experiment, for short. As reflective of the name, survey experiments draw specifically on the strengths of both surveys and experiments to test messages.

6.2.1 How survey experiments work

A survey experiment is an experimental research design that is contained within a standard public opinion survey of the target audience. Survey experiments are ideally administered directly to households based on a sample of the population that a campaign hopes to eventually reach. Because a representative sample is used, the results more accurately reflect the likely impact of the real intervention.

"Experimental approaches are the most suitable strategy to ensure that a messaging campaign is good value for money and is unlikely to backfire."

This methodology contains four important steps:

1. CHOOSING A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE

A strategy is used for surveying a sample of participants that is representative of the total population that a messaging campaign hopes to reach. For example, a sampling frame and protocol based on the census can be used to identify an appropriate sample.

2. RANDOMIZATION AND EXPOSURE

Participants are randomly assigned to at least two groups. One receives no message at all (control group), and the other is exposed to an anti-corruption message (treatment group). Multiple groups/messages can be tested.

3. SURVEY TO GAUGE IMPACTS

All participants answer the same survey questions. These survey questions measure the potential impacts of messaging that the test is interested in assessing (aims of messaging), such as willingness to report corruption.

4. ANALYSIS

Simple statistical analyses are used to find out whether those in the treatment group tended to answer the survey questions differently to those in the control group. Analyses can also assess if a message is more/less impactful with certain groups.

6.2.2 The advantages of survey experiments

The advantages of survey experiments overlap with those of both of their constituent elements, i.e., public opinion surveys and experimental research techniques. First, like surveys, they can be conducted in people's homes, where participants are more likely to feel comfortable about answering potentially sensitive survey questions honestly. This is preferable to an artificial setting such as a focus group or the kinds of studies that ask people to travel to a research laboratory to participate.

Second, they can provide insights into a range of issues and are flexible to examining many potential impacts of messaging. A survey experiment can easily test multiple messages at once, and the results will indicate which message is the most effective to choose to deploy in a campaign. Similarly, the results of a survey experiment can be used to identify whether a message works well for some audiences and not for others. Depending on their design, analyses can be made within sub-populations or groups (like young adults, women, a specific region, and so on), the findings of which can help inform how and to whom messaging campaigns should be targeted.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, given the experimental setup, the results of a survey experiment indicate clearly whether exposure to a message caused a specific reaction. This is because by randomly assigning participants to groups, and making sure that there are no significant variations between the groups in terms of their composition, we can be confident that any differences in survey responses that we find between groups can only be explained by whether they were exposed to a message or not. By comparison, causality is impossible to pin down in focus groups or in surveys that do not have an experimental element.

"The great benefit of a survey experiment is that the results indicate clearly whether exposure to a message was the cause of a specific reaction."

7. MONITORING AND EVALUATION: RESTING ON TESTING

Tests are equally important for ensuring a robust monitoring and evaluation strategy for anti-corruption communication campaigns. In practice, the effectiveness of a messaging campaign is often assessed by its reach, which speaks to an implicit assumption that a campaign will have the intended impacts as long as enough people are exposed to it. Given the evidence discussed so far, this assumption is clearly problematic, and instead messages should be assessed in terms of their impacts.

Experimental methods are most appropriate to use to evaluate a campaign because they can clearly establish how a message impacts the audience. Baseline surveys—a survey taken before a campaign is deployed—and endline surveys, which are taken after a campaign is deployed, can be useful when evaluating the efficacy of a campaign. When surveys are carefully designed and generate an accurate sample of the target audience, a comparison of pre- and post-intervention data can help to establish what impacts a real-world campaign has had.

Depending on the campaign and whether it had a 'call to action', testing can also examine whether the target audience has heeded such calls. For example, have reports of bribery increased, as advocated for? As noted above, because anti-corruption messaging likely impacts some people sub-consciously, focus groups that ask participants directly about how a campaign made people feel or think are ill-advised to rely on for monitoring and evaluation. Participants may not be aware of sub-conscious impacts messaging has had on them and so can be misrepresentative in a focus group about a campaign's impacts.

"Messages should not be evaluated based on how many people they reach, but rather based on their impacts."

Evaluating the effectiveness of a campaign

Campaigns should be monitored and evaluated based on whether they resonate with audiences as intended and fulfil specified campaign aims. To gauge if a message has resonated as intended, campaigners should assess whether the target audience:

- Remembers the campaign (recall)
- Understands the intended meaning (comprehension)
- Believed or agreed with the campaign (credibility)

It is also important to evaluate whether and how a campaign:

- Changed attitudes or beliefs (changed minds)
- Encouraged new behavior (inspired action)
- Made them feel (stirred emotions)

Understanding the whole picture of the impacts of messaging will help to inform more effective future messaging strategies.

Monitoring and evaluating how messages perform in the real world is particularly important because it enables us to see how they play out in the complex information environments that people navigate on a daily basis. **Feeding the results of these reviews back into the design of future messages, and sharing them with the practitioner community, is an important way that we can improve the efficacy of anti-corruption campaigns** over time.

8. HOW TO GET HELP WITH TAILORING, TARGETING, AND TESTING

A key message of this how-to guide has been the importance of the "three Ts": tailoring messages to give them the best possible chance of success, targeting them at a distinct audience, and testing whether they work as intended. This might seem like a daunting task to some readers, and so this final section discusses how you can get help with this work. Individual consultants can of course be hired to provide an assessment of the political and social environment and to review the plausibility of theories of change. Civil society groups can also help in those efforts and provide information about the kinds of messages that are likely to resonate with different kinds of citizens as well as how to communicate them. But to be reliable and effective, all this engagement requires a solid evidence base, which should, at the very least, involve survey data on popular attitudes towards corruption and the scientific testing of how messages impact on the target

audience. Recent best practice used in countries as diverse as Honduras, Moldova and Zambia (NDI 2024), for example, has integrated original focus groups and surveys as a first step towards knowing the audience.

When it comes to generating this data, there are three main options (Sanderson, 2018).

8.1 Collaborate with university researchers

Many university researchers have the necessary skills and are keen to partner with policy makers to design more effective interventions and to be able to access new data. Working with scholars well-versed in message testing can therefore be an excellent way to avoid high costs – especially as they may prove to be a cheaper alternative than other options if their core salaries are already covered by their universities.

8.2 Employ research/survey firms or institutes that have experience in conducting similar experimental studies

Professional research firms often have the expertise needed to design, run and even analyze the types of experiments discussed – but not always, so it is important to check this in advance. A suitable research firm will have high standards in all the research methodologies discussed in this note and a track record of conducting similar studies. Suitable research firms will also be able to explain how they would conduct such a study in considerable detail. If you are interested in understanding how a message might impact on a nationwide audience, these firms can assist you in securing a representative national sample.

8.3 Employ a marketing firm

Marketing companies often have great experience in reaching specific target audiences, which can make them a tempting option. However, the approach to message testing and even the values of some marketing firms may not be aligned with your testing aims. Make sure they know what you want from your tests and check that their suggested approach to testing will deliver that.

These options might seem like they will be time consuming and expensive, but if you embark on them as soon as you start to think about a campaign, they are very likely to make the work around messaging more efficient while also dramatically reducing the risk that the effort and money you invest into a campaign will be wasted because it has no impact or makes the situation worse. Through effective testing, monitoring and evaluation, you can ensure value for money and give your campaign the best possible chance of reducing corruption.

9. FIVE STEP ANTI-CORRUPTION COMMUNICATIONS WORK PLAN

STEP 1.
Decide if anti-corruption messages make sense for you.

STEP 2.
Design campaigns to maximize impact and do no harm.

STEP 3.
Decide how to communicate the message.

STEP 4.
Test messages before deployment.

STEP 5.
Deploy your campaign with a plan to monitor and evaluate impact.

If yes, then …

If this can be done then …

After this …

Then …

And build the evidence base

Step 1. Key questions

- How does awareness-raising feature in your theory of change?
- Will changing public attitudes lead to your desired outcomes?
- Is changing public perceptions feasible?
- Can messages be combined with policy changes or other expressions of commitment to anti-corruption to make them credible?

Step 2. Key elements

- Identify key aims and how messages can be embedded within an anti-corruption strategy to maximize impact.
- Identify your target audience and learn about what they already believe and how they feel about the aims of your messaging campaign, so you can identify themes and issues that resonate and align with their values.
- Avoid negative descriptive messages and consider using positive, credible messaging, e.g. based on public disapproval of corruption.

Step 3. Key elements

- Decide the best placed people and institutions to "author" and deliver the message, based on their credibility to your intended audience.
- Think through how your intended audience can be best reached, and which kinds of media are the most effective and accurate.

Step 4. Key elements

- Focus groups can help to check that the meaning of a message is as intended.
- Use experimental techniques to test what impact messaging is most likely to have on your intended audience.
- Select only those messages shown to have a positive effect.

Step 5. Key elements

- Design a monitoring and evaluation plan to assess impact.
- Communicate messages in conjunction with other interventions.
- Learn from what went wrong or right to inform future messaging campaigns.

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