


Increasing COVID-19 vaccination uptake: Effective messages + best practices from behavioral science

A research summary memo prepared for U.S. state and federal government

Context

In January 2021, [nearly one-third of Americans said they would not take a COVID-19 vaccine](#). In response to this urgent public health challenge, the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) developed **four messages in English (N=20,037) and Spanish (N=1,779) that significantly increase vaccine confidence and willingness to be vaccinated**. If these messages were scaled up to the U.S. population, **approximately 10 million additional residents would be willing to vaccinate**. Our research adopted a racial equity lens to determine which messages are most effective for minority communities, who are among the most vaccine-hesitant but also being [hit hardest by COVID-19](#).



Nearly **one-third of Americans** say they would not get the COVID-19 vaccine

Recommendations for future COVID-19 vaccine communication

All four messages increased willingness to vaccinate by 3 to 4 percentage points in a national sample. We suggest using the top-performing messages from this trial to encourage vaccine uptake and testing new messages to ensure ongoing impact.

1

Use the top-performing message to encourage vaccine uptake: ***“Your loved ones need you. Get the COVID-19 vaccine to make sure you can be there for them.”*** This message increased vaccine confidence across all groups and willingness to vaccinate in most groups. This message significantly increased vaccine confidence for Hispanic participants (3 pp) and was even more effective for Black participants, increasing their willingness to vaccinate by 6 pp.

- All four messages **increased willingness to vaccinate by 3-4 percentage points**.
- They were especially impactful for minority populations, whose **willingness to vaccinate increased by as much as 12%**.
- If these messages were scaled to the entire U.S. population, **10 million more people would be willing to vaccinate**.

2

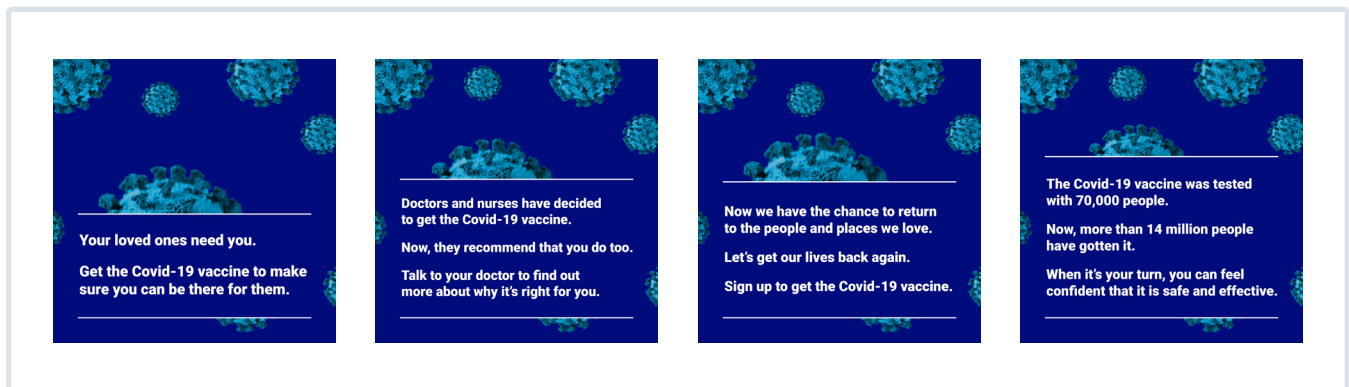
Use healthcare workers and community leaders as messengers, especially to encourage vaccination among Black communities: ***“Doctors and nurses have decided to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Now they recommend that you do too. Talk to your doctor to find out more about why it’s right for you.”*** This message increased vaccine confidence for multiple hesitant groups, including 18-24 year olds, women, and Black participants. Almost half of Spanish-speaking participants surveyed corroborated that a doctor’s recommendation would increase their vaccine confidence.

3

Tap into people’s motivation to get back to pre-pandemic life: ***“Now we have the chance to return to the people and places we love. Let’s get our lives back again. Sign up to get the COVID-19 vaccine.”*** This message performed well for Black and Hispanic participants, and women—all groups who have reported less willingness to vaccinate. This desire to return to normal life also emerged from our focus group feedback, prompting vaccine-hesitant individuals to say they would consider vaccination.

4

Build confidence in the vaccine development process by highlighting other people’s confidence: ***“The COVID-19 vaccine was tested with 70,000 people. Now, more than 42 million people have gotten it. When it’s your turn, you can feel confident that it is safe and effective.”*** This message leverages social norms to increase vaccine confidence and was especially impactful for Black participants and women. In contrast, avoid talking about side effects, even in a brief or cursory way (and especially if not by a medical professional), as this was shown to increase concern about vaccine safety and decrease vaccine confidence among 18-24 year olds in our earlier trials.



Conclusion

We encourage public health leaders to continue using evidence-informed messaging and, when possible, to rigorously test message efficacy to ensure maximum uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine and minimize any possible unintended backfire effects.

For more information about BIT or this research, including for Spanish translations of these messages, please contact Lindsay Moore, Principal Advisor and Head of State and Federal Government, at lindsay.moore@bi.team or Sheena Mirpuri, PhD, Senior Advisor, at sheena.mirpuri@bi.team.