



RESEARCH REPORT

**clear, current,
credible:**

communicating
health
messages in
2023

KANZO

Introduction

How have public attitudes towards health information shifted in the two-year period since the start of the pandemic? Who are the most – and least – trusted sources of health information, and what health issues worry consumers the most?

This paper outlines key findings from our research, exploring how consumer attitudes to health information have shifted over the pandemic period. It follows on from a similar study we conducted in Autumn 2020 to understand how best to develop and deliver health messaging to patients and consumers.

Key points from our research:

- Mental health overtakes Covid, colds and flu as consumers' biggest concern
- Consumers suffering from 'health messaging fatigue'
- Radical redistribution of trust in sources of health news

These insights are based on the opinions of 500 UK consumers, focusing on which sources people are most likely to turn to for trusted health information, as well as the factors that impact their trust in these sources. Alongside this, publicly available information, such as national surveys, academic research and media coverage, was analysed to understand health messaging trends in the current media landscape.



Key findings

Mental health now significantly the biggest concern for consumers

By far the largest single worry for survey respondents this winter was their mental health, with 39% singling this out as their top concern, ranked above Covid, colds and flu. The stress of the pandemic has caused a 'mental health recession' with a corresponding rise in demand for mental health services and medication[1]. This is compounded by an ongoing cost of living crisis. National prevalence of depression is higher than pre-pandemic and this level is especially high in those struggling with their energy bills (one in four people)[2].

More worry about common cold & flu than Covid

You could be forgiven for looking at the health news landscape over the last two years and concluding that Covid-19 was the only show in town.

[1] Financial Times, [There is a deepening mental health recession](#), November 2022

[2] Office for National Statistics (ONS), [Cost of living and depression in adults](#), December 2022

[3] BBC, [Flu comes early in England, with hospital cases rising](#), October 2022

[4] Sky News, [Why Australia's worst flu season in five years could be a warning of what's to come in UK](#), November 2022

Other health issues have of course not gone away and more recently we've seen Monkeypox stories, breakthroughs in Alzheimer's treatment, and growing pressures on the NHS, among other issues.

Also in the news has been the so called 'twindemic' – the added pressure of both Covid-19 and flu on people this winter[3]. Australia set an alarming example with their worst wave in five years[4]. In fact, our survey found more respondents were worried about the return of the common cold and flu than Covid-19 this winter.



Key findings

Radical redistribution of trust

The pull of mainstream media has remained steady since we last explored consumer attitudes to trusted health information – one in three (28%) of respondents to our follow-up survey identified print, online, and broadcast media as one of their most trusted sources of health news.

But consumers have radically redistributed their trust among other sources of information.

Just 35% of respondents said official UK government health advisors were among their most trusted source of information: 30% lower than at the height of the pandemic. With current low visibility of government messaging (compared to 2020), plus pandemic fatigue and general poor perceptions of the government's handling of Covid-19[5], it is no wonder that the public do not consider centrally-issued advice as trustworthy.

[5] YouGov, [YouGov COVID-19 tracker: government handling](#), June 2022

Trust in the third sector is rising

Established healthcare charities and organisations, such as the British Lung Foundation, may be filling this gap – with trust in such bodies up at 20%, from 9% two years ago. Trust was found to be highest amongst the youngest respondents, with 41% highlighting these bodies as trusted sources. This may reflect a wider social trend, as Gen Z and Millennial cohorts are less likely to support central politics and therefore could be turning to alternative, politically-neutral sources of information.

Number of consumers who trust third sector health information

20%

Key findings

Increased reliance on HCPs, but trust in scientists drops

As in 2020, healthcare professionals (HCPs) continue to be the most trusted sources of information, but have grown their share: almost half (47%) of respondents said they would rely on their GP, doctor, or nurse to provide them with trustworthy information to make decisions about their health – a 10% increase from 2020.

However, as it is increasingly difficult for some people to see their GP, new sources are plugging this gap[6]. In 2020, only 5% of respondents said they would rely on a local pharmacist for health advice – our latest survey showed that this had jumped to 20%. Almost one in four people bought medicine online or at a pharmacy after they were unable to see a GP face-to-face[7].

The pull of independent scientists and experts has however dropped since 2020 – falling from 49% to just 29%, potentially reflecting their lower visibility, now daily briefings with high-profile experts are a thing of the past.

[6] The Telegraph, [GPs will be named and shamed over failure to see patients face to face](#), November 2022

[7] The Guardian, [People in UK turning to DIY health treatment amid shortage of GP appointments](#), January 2023



Key findings

Tuned-out consumers as health messaging fatigue hits

Perhaps understandably given the glut of public health information over the past two years, our survey suggests that consumers, too overwhelmed or fatigued by it all, are less engaged with where their information comes from. In 2020, consumers were quick to lose trust in a source of health information – for example, 70% would not trust information that did not come from a qualified healthcare professional. This figure has now dropped to just 51%.

Likewise, two years ago, 44% said that they would lose trust in health information that went against official advice. This has fallen to 23%.

Either consumers are more comfortable with ambiguity, or they are less invested in the detail: there has been an 11% drop in the number of consumers who would lose trust in information that is too vague or confusing.

These figures suggest that it is harder to lose consumers' trust. The question remains as to why consumers do not seem to be interrogating sources of information as rigorously as they were two years ago. The positive interpretation is that consumers are less anxious about their health and therefore take an overall more relaxed approach.

The less positive cause could be a general 'tuning out' from health information altogether. It also suggests that it could be easier for misinformation to take hold, if consumers are paying less attention and are generally disinclined to question sources.

Only

23%

of consumers would lose trust in health info that goes against official advice

Key findings

Reduced attention spans could be bad news for traditional media

Research suggests our attention spans have contracted; with almost half of adults in a King's College London survey reporting that their attention span was shorter than it used to be[8]. BARB (Broadcasters Audience Research Board) data shows that people turned to TV channels for news at the start of the pandemic and then turned away as it progressed[9].

Print and online newspaper reach also decreased over the 2020-2022 period. So, alongside shorter attention spans, consumers are turning away from what would traditionally be considered reliable, longform news outlets.

Media messaging causes heightened anxiety

Health anxiety can easily be amplified by the media we consume[10]. In our current environment, this anxiety is fueled by a barrage of bad news, including the cost of living crisis, recession, and regular industrial action[11].

It is important that health messaging strikes the right tone – particularly when mental health is such a key concern for consumers. Despite the temptation to gain traction with controversial headlines, brands would be wise to avoid alarmist messaging that could cause consumers to switch off, especially given their already-reduced attention spans.

[8] The Guardian, [Is modern life ruining our powers of concentration?](#), January 2023

[9] Ofcom, [News consumption in the UK](#), July 2022

[10] Guardian, [The fear factor: how should we deal with alarmist health reporting?](#), November 2017

[11] NBC, [Taking a break from the news can improve mental health](#), study finds, October 2022



How to create trusted health comms

1

Consumers have been saturated with health information for two years, so don't assume they will automatically listen

- Get the basics right – keep messaging clear, concise, and engaging
- With shorter attention spans, consider the medium too – longform content may not be read

3

Be aware of the external mood – avoid alarmism

- Read the room and be mindful of the increasing external pressures on consumers and their mental health
- Align your messaging to different and evolving consumer needs

2

Trust has shifted – think about who you use to tell your story

- Consumers are less interested in 'experts'
- People look to their GPs or other healthcare professionals for trusted information more than any other source
- Trust in other professional sources of health information, such as pharmacists or healthcare charities, are on the rise. Think about how you can tap into these sources, especially as NHS pressures mean consumers cannot always access their GP quickly



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