



October, 2022

Vaccine Hesitancy in Boulder County

**Parents of Children 0-11
years of age**

GODOT

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In the first half of 2022, Boulder County Public Health commissioned a study of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in parents of children 0–11 years of age.

Our consultants, Beckett Taylor, Christopher Vu Gandin Le, and Ilce Rivero from Godot Communications, ran a series of independent Spanish and English focus groups exploring the web of influence, emotion, information, and misinformation behind the community's decision making.

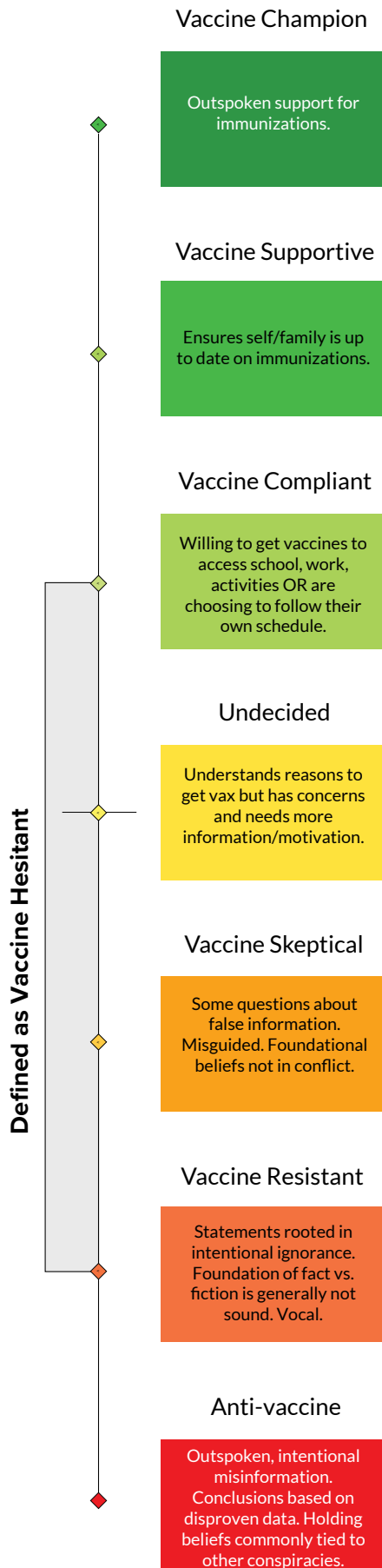
These are the findings.

Note from Godot Communications

By design and intent, much of the exploration presented in this document was completed with minimal direct input from BCPH. While the process was deeply collaborative—with open doors for questions, logistics, and subject matter expertise—BCPH recognized that their direct involvement would impact the information gained, and Godot recognized that there was value in being a blank slate as listeners and interpreters of message.

Godot conducted focus groups with community members who may be hesitant or have questions about vaccinations. Our goal was to use empathy and trauma-informed listening skills to translate that feedback into meaningful and truthful messaging that connects with community members.

Our contact information is included if you would like to reach out to us directly. We likely don't have firm answers on all the nuances of the science behind children's vaccinations. We certainly have an open door, however, if you would like to explore other facets of the how and why people make decisions in the arena of uncertainty and how to reach them through human-centric messaging.



Phase 1: Outreach

Our Participants

Using COVID-19 vaccination data, we decided early in the process to spend time on communities with lower full vaccination rates which included a heavy emphasis on Spanish speakers. The vaccination data for white adults and their older children was very high in the city of Boulder. The vaccine uptake was lower in other municipalities and in the Spanish-speaking population.

Defining Hesitancy

Vaccine hesitancy is not binary. In a series of design sessions, Godot worked with BCPH to develop a spectrum, simplified and based loosely on the work and thinking done by the SAGE working group within the World Health Organization, to help us better discuss the participants' thinking. By design, we looked for participants whom we felt would fall into the "hesitant" category, which includes many people who are vaccinated and have their children vaccinated.

Those in the dark green (top) were not the primary study group, although they did end up being represented. Those in the dark red (bottom), where conclusions are based on disproven data, were not represented in the study.

Recruitment

Hard-to-reach groups are hard to reach for many reasons. Understanding the risk and bias of digital-only recruiting, we began with a more analog recruitment process, leveraging community relationships alongside printed material in traditional and non-traditional physical spaces.

Godot worked with several local organizations to help us recruit within their relevant communities, including El Centro Amistad, Out Boulder County, Sister Carmen, and Wild Plum Center, along with secondary connections. In addition, we distributed fliers and posters by hand in public locations, from pawn shops to libraries to stores on Longmont's Main Street, searching for engagement and participants outside the bubble of social media. Finally, we secured a radio interview between Radio La Ley and El Centro Amistad, talking about the focus groups and how people could take part.

After a couple of weeks of this active outreach, we ultimately ran a brief digital campaign, filling roughly 50% of our seats through email lists and social media.

Based on applications, realizing that many, if not most, participants had children in both the 0–4 and 5–11 age groups, we opted not to split the groups by age, as originally intended.

Printed and Digital Material

After looking at a few designs as a group, we created two versions—one with stock photography, the other in a more illustrated style—with the simple headline of, “We have questions. You have answers.”

We did not run a formal A/B test, nor did we gather reactions to each recruiting flier, but from community feedback throughout the process we can assume a level of comfort with non-literal imagery.



Collateral example: Bi-lingual image for social media

Phase 2: Selection and Logistics

Logistics and Technology

The enrollment process was straightforward, with a couple of lessons learned. The QR codes and simplified links on fliers, posters, and social media took potential participants to a simple survey (Wufoo). If they met initial criteria, they were sent another link to choose a group and a time (Calendly). If they did not meet the criteria or were not able to schedule, they received a thank you note. Participants were given a \$40 gift card for their time.

The most challenging part of the logistics was breaking groups into Spanish and English, parents with older children and parents with younger children, and in-person vs. virtual meetings. We asked for details and preferences in the survey but found few people interested in joining in person, and many of the participants (almost 70%) had children in both age groups. After listening to several groups and filling the others, Godot made a conscious decision to combine age groups and include follow-up questions along the lines of, “Does that belief hold for your younger kids as well?”

With in-person groups, we went so far initially as to find and reserve locations near public transportation or community hubs, provide childcare, and actively recruit participants who marked virtual as a preference. Ultimately, however, we only ended up with two people willing to take part in person. Part of this was due to pandemic aversion to in-person meetings, but part was likely overestimating the digital divide. Participants simply preferred virtual and had little difficulty with the virtual meeting technology (Zoom).

Lessons Learned

Our ultimate decisions do not suggest that more refined grouping and in-person sessions are undesirable, but given where we were in the pandemic and the type of qualitative information Godot was seeking, running virtual groups with a broader age range of children was the best choice.

Other approaches, from casual gatherings around picnic tables to formal, structured sessions with a larger ask of the participants, should always be considered depending on the community you are reaching and the nature of the information you are seeking.

Phase 3: The Input

Philosophy

In the focus groups, we expected to hear many of the high-level concerns being tackled nationally. Godot's role in this was to not only reinforce the core messaging coming from the CDC and WHO, but also to find themes and approaches specific to the people of Boulder County that could be addressed truthfully, genuinely, and with empathy.

Internally, we described this as a "last mile problem," drawing on the similarity between intercity public transportation representing the communication of the government agencies on a national level and the work local public health agencies are doing as the buses and taxis and subways that get people from the station to their home or work. The problems tackled by local solutions simply require different tools and different thinking than national solutions.

Theme 1:

Understanding Uncertainty and Knowing the Unknown

Humans crave certainty. Firm, binary answers. Science, paradoxically, embraces elements of uncertainty in pursuit of solving greater problems. We—meaning all those involved in influencing this change—should consider showing our work and process, bringing others along on the journey.

We can't tell you with absolute certainty that a child won't have a bad reaction to the jab, but we can at least explain the math, the metrics, and the history behind why, without hesitancy, we made the choice to vaccinate our own kids.

"Because the efficacy is very very very low, I'll wait to see better data. Maybe wait for the better vaccine to come out."

"I guess I don't see a point in vaccinating either of my children."

"I know a lot of people have gotten it for their kids and you say it's safe, but I don't like taking risks."

Theme 2:

Relating to Community and Ecosystem

A foundational, intentional lack of understanding scale and personal impact is part of human nature. It's a defense mechanism against emotional vertigo.

And it's OK.

When people retreat to selfish decisions in most cases, no one dies. Personal decisions are really the only thing in people's direct control. But, in the context of vaccines and prevention, that moment of realization—that moment of sonder—that we are in a vast ecosystem where our decisions impact layers and layers of people is a vital step in making these decisions.

"We have to take care of our family. That's how I view it, it's individualistic."

"Taking the vaccine won't protect my neighbor."

Theme 3:

Ambivalence and the Tipping Point of Decision Making

Ambivalence should not be confused with ambiguity or indifference. It isn't synonymous with vague or indecisive. It means being pulled in different directions, sometimes viscerally. It's a symptom of cognitive dissonance. The ambivalent person both knows and cares and, at the same time, is forced into a position of seeming to not care.

This approach is grounded in motivational interviewing and trauma-informed communication, allowing the audience to reach their own decisions with only the most subtle of direction.

"I've become fairly vaccine hesitant, even though I was pro mask and pro childhood vaccines. I have nursing/vaccination concerns."

"When the vaccine was released, I wasn't really open to the idea, I was worried about the long term side effects. I was very doubtful but recently with the new variant, I'm considering it now with all the new information. We have a three-month-old baby, and one of the major reasons I'm considering it is to protect my child."

"I had a lot of hesitation, I grew up in a very 'natural' community so I had hesitations about government/big business. But I started following a lot of epidemiologists, and I'm still a little nervous about negative reactions, rather than just isolating myself. But I was thinking about the community as well, for my mom. I was worried about the vaccine b/c I'm pregnant but now I feel better about it and I'm wondering if I can get a booster before the baby comes."

Phase 3: The Output

Structure

With the focus groups complete, the creative messaging needed a structure. Understanding that the end goal of this project phase was exploratory work toward a larger campaign, Godot created three possible campaign messages, each tied to one of the three themes: Knowing the Unknown, Ecosystem, and Ambivalence.

Secondly, we leveraged and adapted a simplified version of the Extended Parallel Process Model by Kim Witte, developed as a framework to understand fear-appeal messaging. The model, illustrated below, provides four quadrants created by two axes, with the Y representing the perception of risk from COVID-19 and the X representing the perceived efficacy of the vaccine.

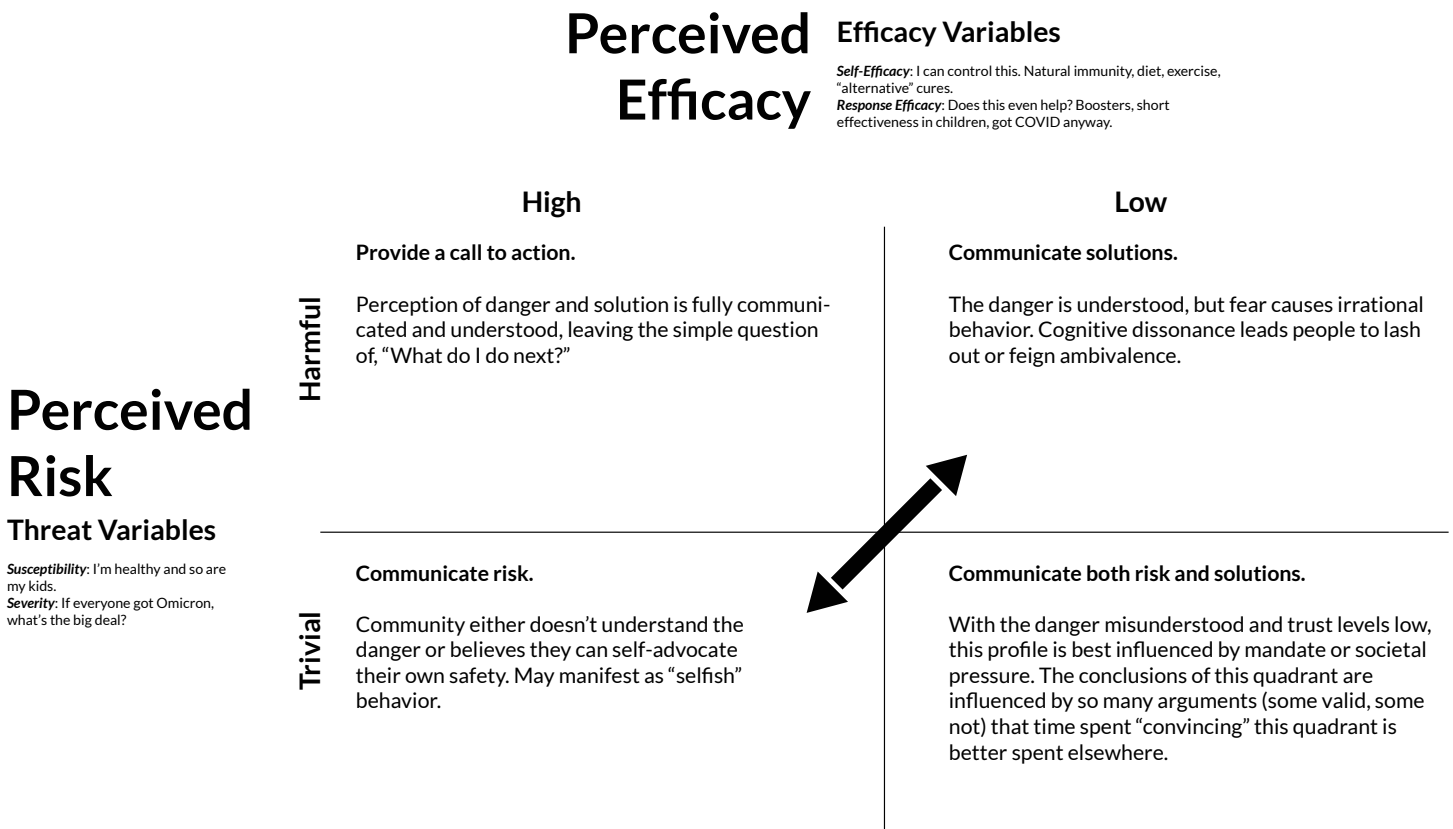
Essentially, people in the upper-left quadrant understand the risks and the efficacy of the vaccine for their children and simply need a call to action and details to take the next step.

Those in the lower-right quadrant neither understand the efficacy of the vaccine nor the

danger of the virus. Messaging to them often doesn't yield results, and time is better spent on the other quadrants to move the needle.

In the upper-right and the lower-left quadrants are the people we need to reach. In the former, we have a population who understands the risk of COVID-19 but doesn't feel the vaccine is the solution. In the latter, we have people that are perfectly accepting of the vaccine but do not understand or underestimate their personal risk of illness or might believe that the virus is exaggerated.

The challenge is creating messages for one of the target quadrants without pushing the others away. For example, if you tell a group all about the dangers of the virus for children, but they don't have trust in the vaccine, they see it as fear mongering. Vice versa, if you tell a group about the efficacy of the vaccine for children but they don't fear the disease itself, it reads as over-cautious or—perhaps more dangerously—that the government is encouraging the vaccine sales for reasons other than health.



Concepts

As you view these approaches, there are three things to keep front-of-mind:

- 1) **These are concept boards for a full campaign.** Most of the images you see are what we call “hero images,” meaning even though they look a bit like a PowerPoint slide, they represent a much larger look and feel for the campaign. In other words, don’t just imagine these applications as posters or social media, but also, murals, buses, television spots, coloring books, training materials. The concepts need to be extendable. These are just snapshots.
- 2) **This is a first-level concept exercise.** These concepts have only gone through two community feedback sessions of and should not be considered final or vetted. If one of these directions goes into full creation, several more steps would be necessary to send them out with confidence. There might even be typos and things.
- 3) **Remember the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) and the metaphor of messaging to the last mile.** These treatments get a little strange, even unintuitive. Beyond the visual intrigue and clickability, the quirkiness here is intentional. It’s a way of softening the push and pull of the EPPM. It makes them feel created for people rather than populations. And by not diving too deeply into the hard facts of COVID-19 vaccinations and kids, we keep their thinking high-level and empathetic, understanding that when it comes to a more foundational, global message, the national organizations continue to provide excellent material.

Theme #1. The Point Project.

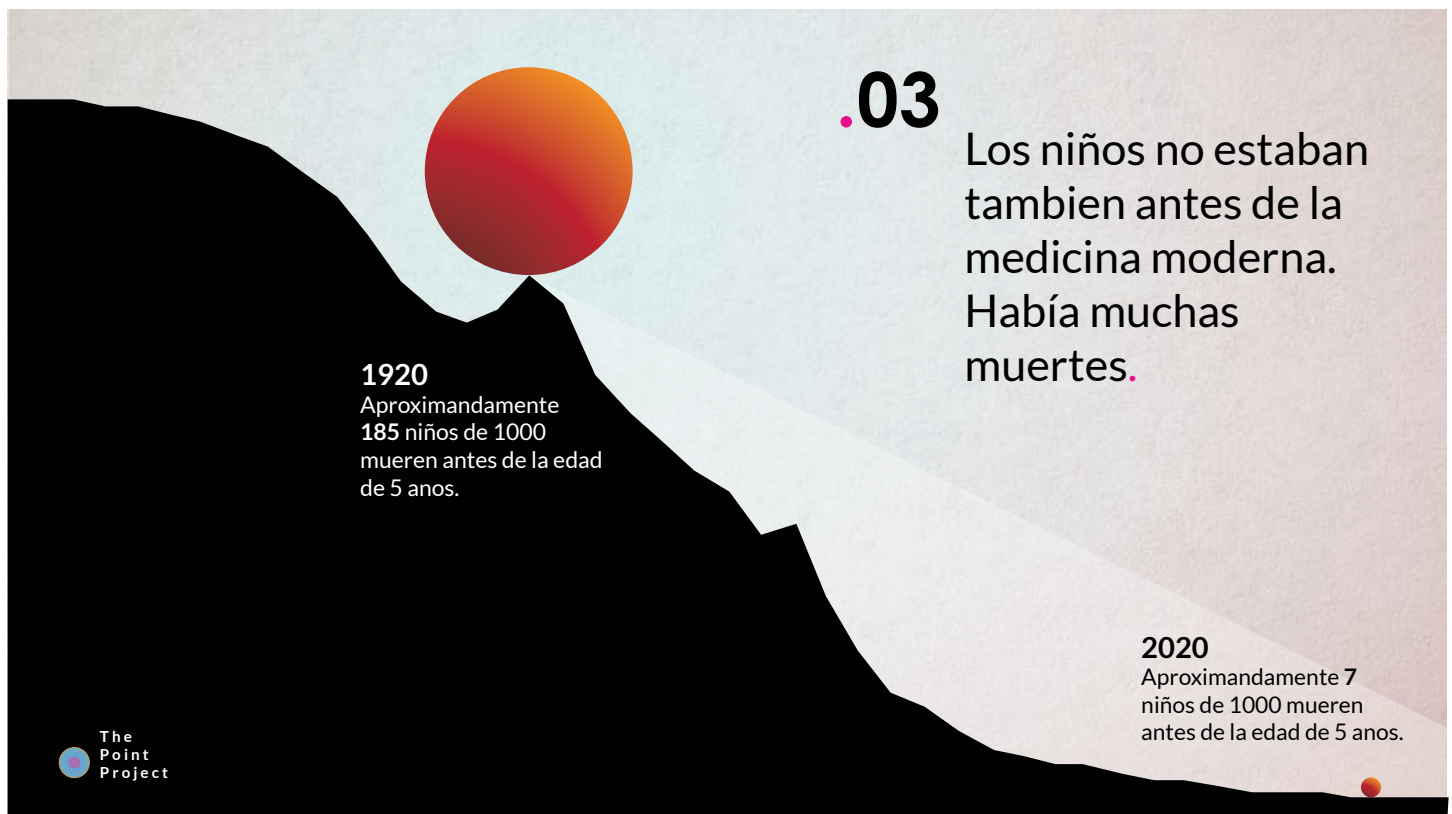
This approach focuses on the unknown and how science interprets and communicates evidence, risk, and reward. It explores the difference between evidence and proof, the relationship between scale and experience, and the dissonance between trust in process versus faith in the individual.

Initially, the design feels slightly unapproachable, abstract. But as the viewer gets drawn in, they realize that these are very intuitive concepts illustrated in an interesting, rather than an esoteric, way. The graphs and the balls and the rays of light have a weight to them. Tangible. And by keeping the literal images of humanity out of the mix, the audience is able to engage more easily with their

inner dialog of why their choices may be different than our own.

It's also rather aesthetic. Despite its minimal style, designers clearly had a voice in this creation. You can feel that these were conceived with care and purpose. We wanted people to see them with calculated detachment but be pulled in by the detail and the story that these fairly primitive shapes were telling.

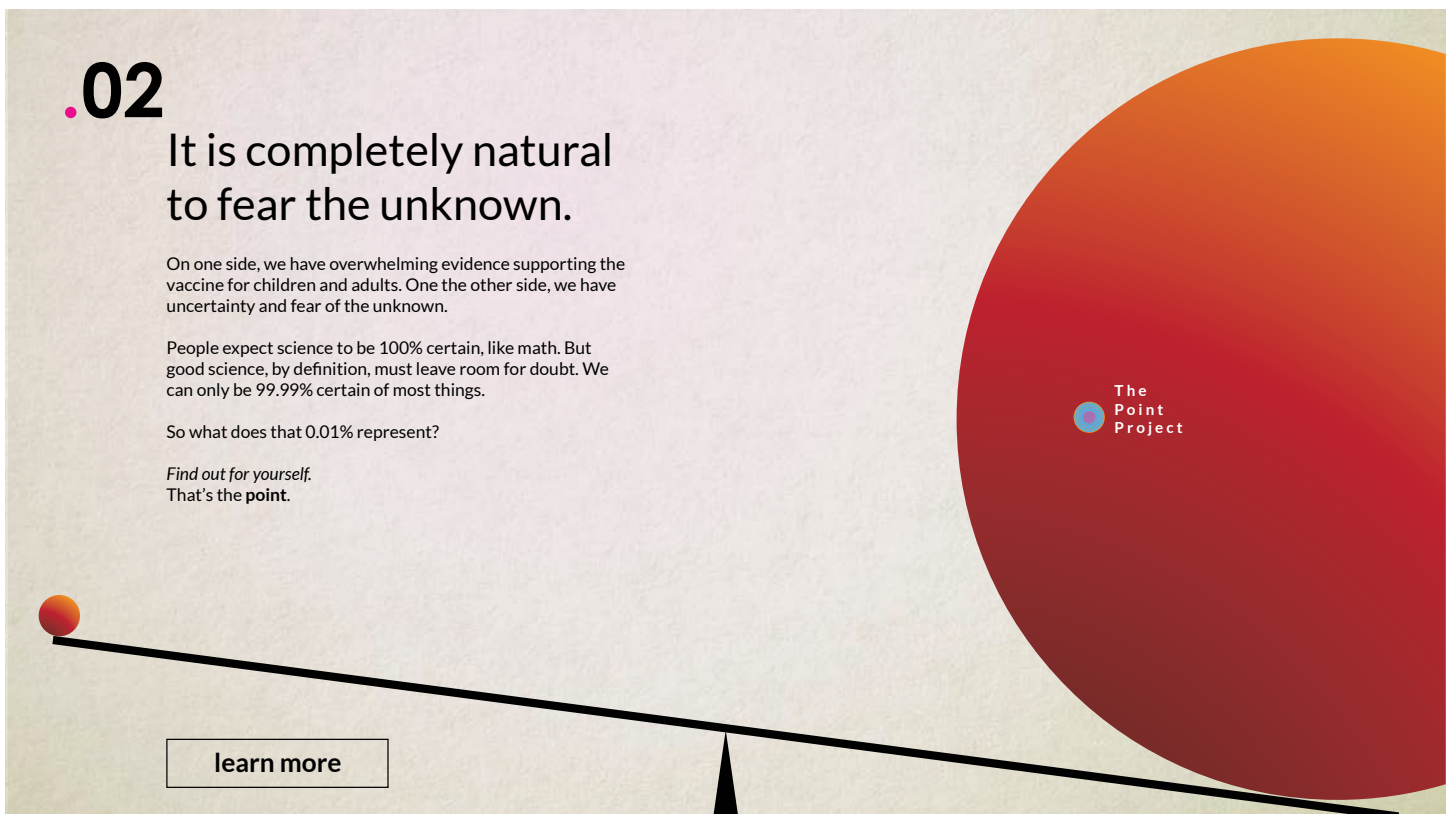
Finally, without abandoning the math, we still wanted it all to feel human. In early revisions, when these were far starker, bleaker, we heard the feedback that we could draw in more eyes if we softened the feel while still maintaining its data-driven heart.



NOTE: Though not explicitly shown in this visual, the black area of this illustration is a graph of the fall of childhood mortality over the last 100 years, showing the cumulative effect of good decision making.

English Translation/Alternative: Kids were not “fine” before modern medicine. They just died a lot at a very young age.

Other versions: This approach translates well to other nuances and can gracefully lead a viewer to a good conclusion





Extended Application: Mural mock-up showing the balance between fear and evidence.

This is extremely adaptable. From traditional print or social media messaging to interactive to multi-media to (shown in this mock-up) a downtown mural reinforcing our core message of evidence over fear.

The idea of a mural had immediate, emotional traction, and would work across all options. One participant was so excited by this that they had comments on the brightness of the sunflowers, despite this being a mock-up and not really existing.

Yet.

One of the first questions we would ask in a second phase of this project would be, “Where else can you see this approach being used outside Facebook and other traditional public health channels?”

Theme #2. Community Ecosystem.

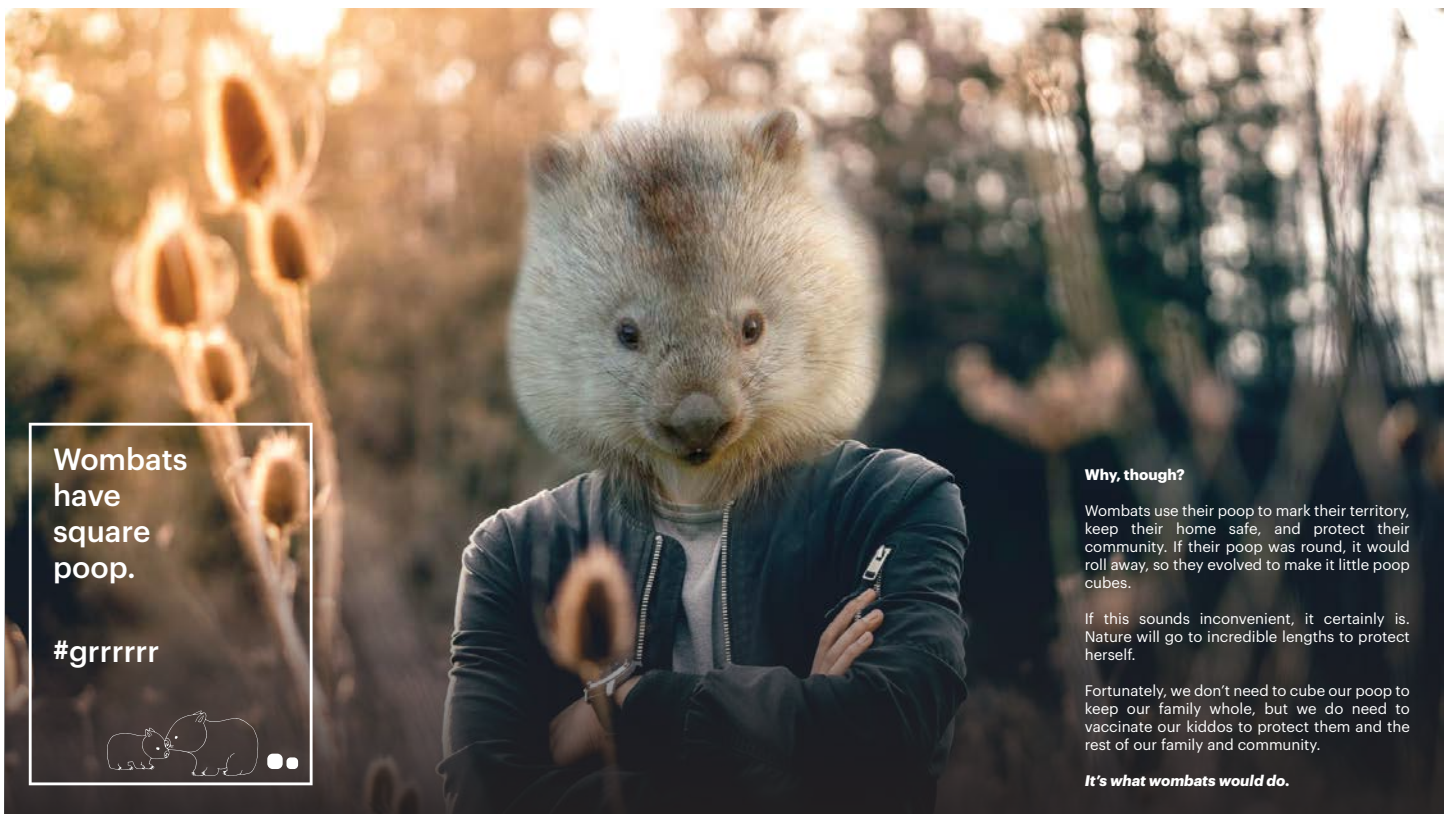
When we watch TV commercials, we are often drawn in by that Super Bowl spot that leans into the absurd. Culturally, we've reached a point where having a talking gecko sell us car insurance is considered completely normal. Handsome guy on a horse on a boat selling us body wash? Sure.

These successful campaigns lead with a puzzle. A light, whimsical, human puzzle that invites us to solve the mystery of the concept. They make the

viewer feel smart. They reward curiosity with a moment of levity as they flip the page upside-down to read the answer key.

Curiosity, levity, human-to-human communication are the sworn enemies of bias.

Folks know that Public Health isn't there to talk to them about wombats or lizards. They know Public Health is there to talk about health and safety. By recognizing that fact, it makes the whole conversation a little bit more pleasant, whether we all fully agree or not.



Sample: In photo-realistic application.

Other versions: As with others, there is a reach and richness to this concept that could be effective across multiple channels.



Horned lizards squirt blood out their eyes.

#grrrrrr



I'm sorry, what?

When the horned lizard is provoked, in danger, protecting their nest... squirt, squirt! Blood shoots out their lizard eyeballs. Scares off other beasts who are trying to eat them. It's the only tool they really have to keep their lounge safe. (Yes, a group or a family of lizards is technically referred to as a "lounge.")

Fortunately, humans don't need to go to such extremes. We have other tools to keep our kiddos and our loved ones safe from the predators of severe disease and increased transmission.

So, yes, vaccinate your kids to keep them healthy along with the rest of your lounge.

It's what short-horned lizards would do.



Los uómbat tienen caca cuadrada.

#grrrrrr



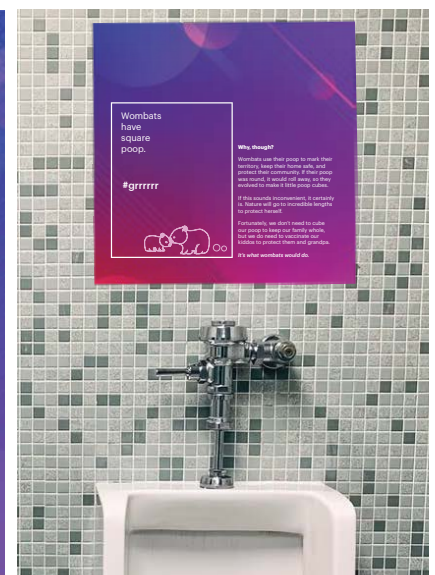
¿Por qué?

Los uómbat usan su caca para marcar su territorio, mantienen su hogar seguro y proteger a su comunidad. Si su caca fuera redonda, rodaría, por lo que evolucionaron para convertirla en pequeños cubos de caca.

Si esto suena inconveniente, ciertamente lo es. La naturaleza hará todo lo posible para protegerse a sí misma.


Afortunadamente, no necesitamos cortar nuestra caca en cubos para mantener a nuestra familia completa, pero si necesitamos vacunar a nuestros niños para protegerlos a ellos y al resto de su familia y comunidad.

Es lo que harían los uómbat.



Wombats have square poop.

#grrrrrr



Why though?

Wombats use their poop to mark their territory, keep their homes safe, and protect their community. If their poop were round, it would roll away so they wouldn't be able to make a little poop cube.

If this sounds inconvenient, it certainly is. Nature will go to incredible lengths to protect itself.

Fortunately, we don't need to make our poop to keep our family whole, healthy, or even to protect our grandpa. It's what wombats would do.

Other placements: Advertisers know to meet folks where they are. We should think the same way in application from beer coasters to stress balls to posters above urinals.

Theme #3. Ambivalence and the Tipping Point

Aesthetics are still a driving, gut-level force in how people ingest information. We connect symmetry to balanced decision making, color palette to care and purpose, detail to quality of product. Sometimes it's used for good, sometimes it's used for evil, but it's universal.

In this approach, Godot explored the role of pure aesthetics set against the idea of learning lessons through fables.

The story hasn't been written, but it may have something to do with a woman who was afraid to cross the bridge. Her "tipping point" in deciding to walk into the unknown was realizing that the children were safe. She could see them playing across the river. But they had stopped visiting her. Not because they were in danger, but, rather, they had forgotten her.



Sample: High-level concept for aesthetic-driven fable about decision making

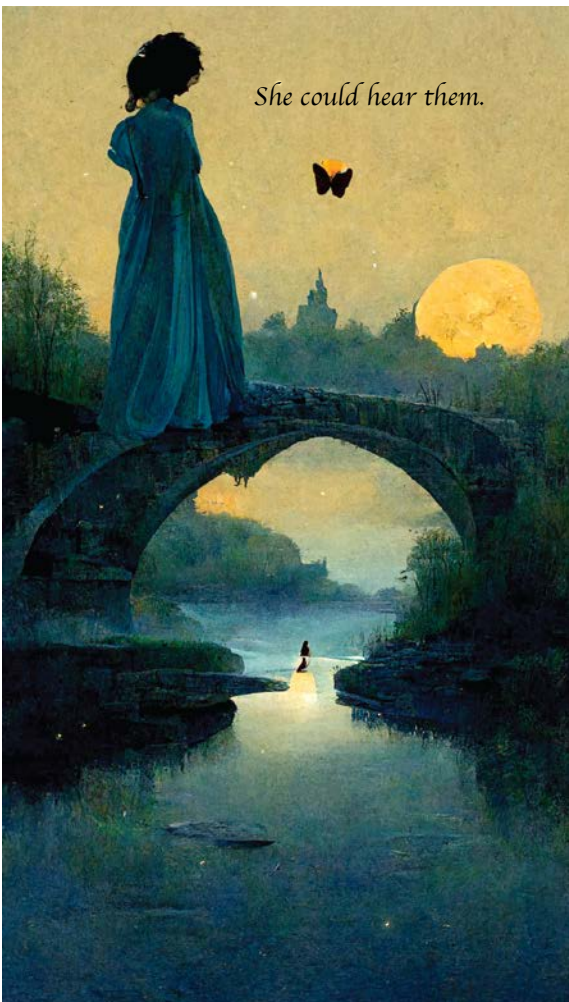
Critical Note.

We had questions about this approach. It isn't, on the surface, as flexible as other directions. The reaction from the groups, however, has been so strong that we felt the need to explore its applicability and, importantly, its feasibility in terms of production cost. One reaction-group participant exclaimed, "Could we get one version with cute bugs for girls and another with ugly bugs for boys?" We wanted to honor that positive feedback.

The results are intriguing, undeniably aesthetic (despite significant help from A.I.), and could be built into all sorts of message vehicles with creative thinking.

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Variations: Here we see a comic book application, but would translate wonderfully to video, interactive, children's books, postcards.



Conclusion + Final Notes

Throughout this process, a few high-level observations emerged from reactions to the approach and discussions outside of the specific focus groups. As you consider next steps and your own messaging, please let these sit in the back of your mind.

First, an axiom of modern messaging is, “The customer is not a fool.” In this case, the customer is our community members, friends, neighbors, and ourselves. They see and analyze messaging through the same lens that we do and are perfectly capable of making emotional leaps with us as long as we are talking *with* them, not *at* them.

Second, we should stay aware that the foundational, critical level message of safety and efficacy is beautifully and wonderfully covered by national organizations. Our job as local and state-level organizations is to reinforce that message and give context—an invitation to our Boulder County community—to look at and digest that information through a warmer, more empathetic lens.

Finally, consider that the pandemic—fearing for our kids and our families, scrolling through our news over coffee before tucking into our all-day binge of Ted Lasso and Animal Crossing—is a shared experience. We know the uncertainty that folks are feeling because the pandemic created a lot of uncertainty that was felt by everyone.

– Godot.

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