BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine

Looking for better science communication? Do it like the Harvard Business Review

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To cite: Nassis GP, Verhagen E, Busch H, *et al*. Looking for better science communication? Do it like the Harvard Business Review. *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine* 2023;**9**:e001611. doi:10.1136/bmjsem-2023-001611

Accepted 1 June 2023

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HELLO, IS THERE ANYBODY LISTENING?

There is a gap between most researchers' work and what happens in everyday life of clinicians who practise in a sports context or deliver health-related programmes for the community. For example, scientists advocate using Nordic hamstrings exercise for injury prevention, but very few players do it.[1] Why? Do they want to sustain a severe performance-limiting injury? In the public health sector, despite a large amount of research showing the benefits of physical activity in reducing the risk of premature death, little progress has been made in translating the WHO guidelines on physical activity into actions within the communities in most countries.[2] It is unlikely that people prefer the adverse health outcomes of inactivity, and it is more considerate to assume that our messages do not reach and affect those intended.

We acknowledge that this is a complex problem,[3 4] and we think we can come a long way if we tackle it from our side—the knowledge creators—and those working for knowledge dissemination—particularly the academic journals. With this editorial, we intend to spark a discussion on what academic journals and researchers can do better to close the gap between knowledge creation and adoption of this knowledge into everyday life.

THE SUCCESS STORY OF HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

When discussing science communication, we believe some good practices can be learnt from the Harvard Business Review (HBR). The HBR was launched in 1922 as a magazine for the Harvard Business School, and its mission is to 'serve as a bridge between academia and enterprises'.[5] The articles in HBR are research based but targeted at a non-academic readership. This is one of the main differences between HBR and scholarly journals and arguably one of its successes. HBR attracts a broad readership, including students, academics, company employees, top executives and business owners. The HBR English language total paid circulation is above 286 000,[6] and it publishes its content in 13 languages which is evidence of its broad reach across several regions. Most importantly, HBR is considered a prominent journal for managers and decision-makers. We assume the content of HBR influences the decision-making of some of the CEOs of top organisations and policy-makers. And is that not precisely what we would need in Sports and Exercise Medicine (SEM); to influence the decision-makers?

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM HBR?

So, if we believe that HBR has succeeded in achieving the goals we chase, what lessons can we draw from HBR that may help upgrade the science communication within SEM? We can expand our articles to reach a bigger audience, like coaches, athletes and community members if we make the content relevant to them. This is what HBR is doing, and it has increased its readership. How can we do this?

Focus on solving 'real' problems

Our research should be based on problems identified by the end-users who could take part in the study's design and the interpretation of the results. Admittingly, we have been moving to this approach in SEM research recently, but we are still not there.[7 8]

Write more simply

Academic journals may consider a 'What is there for the practitioners and decision-makers' section in every article with a potential application in the field. Along the same line, articles could have a section beyond the standard introduction that includes the 'background', 'definition of the problem' and 'solution proposed' as HBR does. The authors build their story in 100 words using

simple language. This may attract the attention of practitioners, community members and decision-makers. See it as a layperson's summary. The use of infographics may also help. Finally, authors could avoid necessary jargon and confusing and/or unnecessary acronyms.

Become more agile and break down silos

Journals care about their impact factor, and this is perhaps a reason they include studies with significant differences and good practices only. But focusing only on the significant results and the best practice is not the best approach. We can include any type of research if it is based on rigorous methodology and seeks to answer an important question. We could also include fast-track case studies or short debates on trending topics. For example, 'What have we learnt from Neymar's ankle injury management during the FIFA 2022 World Cup?' or 'How to translate the physical activity guidelines into a success story for public health? Lessons learnt from XYZ country'. This is how we connect with society and remain relevant to the stakeholders.

WHAT IS IN IT FOR THE SEM?

Publishing our science is a cornerstone of academic research, but we should do better to narrow the gap between research results and their clinical applications. Better science communication is critical to reaching a broad audience. It helps us to create public understanding and support for scientific research and its applications. Communicating science effectively and engagingly bridges the gap with the public, promotes informed decision-making, and increases public participation in science-related issues. HBR figured this out. Let us use their lessons to make an impact in SEM.

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Contributors GPN drafted the paper, all authors contributed in reviewing the manuscript and approved the final version.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests EV is editor in chief of BMJ Open Sports & Exercise Medicine.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Provenance and peer review Commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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