

# Changing minds with understanding, empathy

By Lorne Stelmach

Eric Yaverbaum speaks from both his professional and personal experience when he addresses one of the key challenges being faced now with the continuing COVID-19 crisis.

The 40-year public relations veteran, communications expert, and bestselling author of seven books has survived the virus twice, so that augments his perspective, particularly in addressing the issue of vaccine skepticism.

A regular TV pundit, Yaverbaum has been reaching out across North America to start a discussion about the need to communicate effectively with skeptics, how to change minds, and why empathy is vital in public health communications.

"I'm not a doctor, and I'm not a scientist, but I'm a guy who has COVID twice and gotten vaccinated ... I've learned an enormous amount," said Yaverbaum, who is the CEO of Ericho Communications and author of *Public Relations for Dummies and Leadership Secrets of the World's Most Successful CEOs*.

"I'm in the communications field, and I don't think we have done a great job of communicating, one, just what the stakes are and, two, just how safe it is," he said in a phone interview last week. "And we do need to have some empathy for people ... if we show a little empathy and understand what the reservations are, I think it will go a long way."

In the U.S. at least, Yaverbaum observed, vaccine supply has begun to outpace demand, so the questions that need to be asked is what is causing vaccine slowdown and how can it be addressed to reach herd immunity?

Even before the pandemic, vaccine skepticism was on the rise. It's led to the resurgence of diseases like measles, so it's clear that winning over skeptics is a critical public health issue.

That skepticism remains despite the fact all five COVID-19 vaccines with public results have eliminated deaths and drastically reduced hospitalizations, Yaverbaum noted.

"To each his own, but if we all want to get out of this,

we need to take a hard look at the facts and figures and make decisions accordingly ... it's been a really long year," he said.

"I listen to people's fears and concerns, and I'm not downplaying them," he continued.

"I think there are some communities that haven't had positive experiences with medical professionals ... they have reasons for being skeptical, so I think a little empathy and understanding of their fears and concerns is pretty important," Yaverbaum said. "I think work has to be done to earn their trust.

"This will vary a little bit from country to country and culture to culture ... but I do think there are some communities that have not had positive experiences with medical professionals historically, and of course they're going to raise an eyebrow, understandably so. A little empathy goes a long way in helping to explain it."

Yaverbaum touched on how he sees there has been some failures or shortcomings in getting the right messaging out to people.

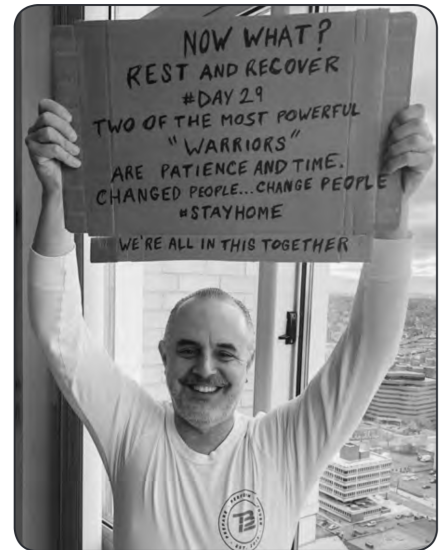
"The concerns are easily answered," he stressed, citing for example that "it's just a very small percentage of people who are vaccinated who are still going to get COVID-19.

"I think it's important to appeal to the emotions of people. What's important to them; what are they missing out on by not getting vaccinated," he said. "Have a real focus on the positive ... [that] you don't have to worry about infecting loved ones or friends.

"The vaccine is actually the way that life could return to normal, whatever normal is going to be," Yaverbaum said. "I think people need to hear optimism and hope also, the promise of the future we can all have because of the vaccines."

As for his own experience with COVID-19, Yaverbaum has been active on social media through his journey and offered encouraging messages to others.

"While they've always said that happiness was an inside job ... now you're inside in a different way. It's a great time to practice changing the way you look at things ... and I promise you that if you do, the things you look at will change," he said in one of his Face-



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Public relations specialist Eric Yaverbaum says vaccine skepticism is a tough nut to crack, but part of the key is not downplaying people's fears and concerns.

book posts.

"Here's all I'll have to say to this nasty and highly contagious virus and unwelcomed visitor ... is that the best you got? Life is a lot like the ocean I love so much. The waves will try to knock you down and push you back to where you started. Not me. Not this time."

"My anti-bodies are off the charts, which is very comforting to me," Yaverbaum noted in conclusion. "I'd like to give a few of them to other people if I could."

## Well water testing promoted

By Lorne Stelmach

A safe and dependable supply of drinking water is critical for health, so it is vital to ensure water systems and wells meet all safety standards.

That priority gets a boost each year from watershed districts province-wide offering programs to encourage people to submit water samples for testing.

Good water quality should be a priority for all and if you are concerned about your water quality, you have to assume direct responsibility and test your water.

"We can take things for granted ... and it's such an important thing," said Cliff Greenfield, manager of the Pembina Valley Watershed District, which is offering two upcoming water testing days across the region.

Water samples can be dropped off June 1 and June 8 at a number of locations including the district of-

office in Manitou by 10 a.m. and the R.M. of Stanley office by 11 a.m. both days.

The district will pick up the samples and assume all shipping costs to transport them to Horizon Labs in Winnipeg where testing for nitrates and bacteria and coliform will be done as well as a basic drinking water analysis.

If you receive a positive test, the district offers a program for shock chlorination of wells, and abandoned well filling is also offered with benefits including maintaining the present groundwater quality and the removal of any hazard to people and livestock.

Drinking water should not contain any coliform bacteria or any E.coli bacteria, so it is recommended people test well water at least once a year or after any type of well maintenance.

A change in taste, odor and appearance of water or an onset of illness are reasons to suspect an abnormality in water. Water containing total coliform

or E.coli bacteria is not safe to drink.

Nitrates in water are also a health concern. They react with hemoglobin in the blood, causing lack of oxygen in the blood. Infants are at serious risk from this problem. Among livestock, ruminants are most susceptible because bacteria in the rumen convert nitrate to the much more dangerous nitrite. Pigs are less susceptible because this conversion doesn't occur to the same extent.

Most water nitrates come from organic material and run-off from heavily fertilized fields.

Greenfield estimated they usually will do around 150 tests through this program annually.

"At least we're raising awareness and helping make this happen for people ... wells should be tested every year," he noted.

"In areas where there are water pipelines, there's less reliance ... for the RM of Stanley, for the most part, its rural areas have access to a pipeline, but definitely not everywhere, and the further west you go, there's most need for this," he said.

If you have any questions or concerns about well water safety, contact the Pembina Valley Watershed District at 204 242 3267.