

How to Create Effective Public Service Announcements

In order to be **effective**, a public service announcement (PSA) must:

1. have a clear and realistic objective;
2. be designed for, and tested with a specific focus audience;
3. have a number of qualitative features including:
 - a. an appropriate type of appeal;
 - b. an appropriate messenger;
 - c. credibility;
 - d. understandability;
 - e. relevance;
 - f. high quality mechanical construction;
 - g. high quality creative execution.
4. be distributed using channels and vehicles that are suitable for the focus audience and the chosen objective.
5. be distributed in substantial quantity/with substantial frequency to ensure that the focus audience is adequately exposed to the message.

1. Selecting Clear and Realistic Objectives

PSAs are generally developed for one of three reasons:

- to prevent a behavior from starting;
- to stop a behavior (cessation);
- or to encourage adoption of a new behavior.

This is difficult to accomplish, as changing behavior is a complex process. In addition to increasing awareness and knowledge about a problem, you must convince a person that the problem is relevant to them, then change their beliefs, attitudes and often core values. Finally you must bring them to the point where they intend to change their behavior and give them the skills to carry it out.

When using mass media behavior change is even more difficult to accomplish. Many years of experience has shown that even in large, expensive, carefully controlled and monitored campaigns, getting people to change their behaviors by trying to impact on these intermediate steps on the way to behavior change (awareness, knowledge, perceived relevance, beliefs, attitudes, values, behavioral intentions, skill building), is challenging. Current research shows that, very rarely, are we having any effect on behavior, and when we are, it is limited (for example, a well designed and disseminated campaign might be expected to reduce smoking from 25% to 21% of the population).

Impact, is of course, highly variable, depending on the complexity of the behavior, the readiness/receptivity of the audience and the quality and quantity of the messages. Also, some types of objectives are easier to accomplish via mass media, than others.

We can divide all messages into three types: persuasion, instruction and awareness raising. Persuasion messages include attempts to impact on beliefs, attitudes, values, behavioral intentions and behaviors themselves. These are the most difficult to accomplish using mass media. Instructional/skill building messages are also difficult to do using mass media, as time is normally limited and the interaction necessary to correct mistakes and answer questions is not available. The final type is awareness raising. We will focus primarily on **awareness-raising PSAs**, since they are the most likely to show an effect and can prepare the audience for future messages, in formats other than mass media that focus on skill building or persuasion.

The following are examples of suitable objectives for awareness-raising **PSAs**:

- **Create** recognition of a topic or practice.
- **Convey** that the health problem is important.
- **Convey** simple forms of new information regarding the health topic.
- **Trigger** activation of a behavior change among favorably disposed audiences.
- **Foster** compliance with social influences or policies.
- **Stimulate** interpersonal communication about the topic.
- **Encourage** further information seeking about the topic.
- **Sensitize** individuals to subsequently encountered messages (outside the campaign).

So far, we have looked only at directing messages at the audience whose behavior we hope to change. In fact, there is evidence to show that working with the mass media to indirectly reach the audience may have more potential for affecting behaviors. For example, it may be more **effective** to target influential community members, or opinion leaders, than the group who actually needs to change. This could include people such as parents, employers, doctors, Tribal leaders, journalists, friends, police, educators, and entertainers. Through role modeling, these opinion leaders could affect behavior change in the desired audience.

The media might also indirectly change behavior by affecting public opinion and increasing problem salience in the minds of legislators, who can implement public policies that facilitate healthy behavior and discourage unhealthy behavior. Though still the less common of the two broad approaches (direct and indirect), many public health academics and practitioners are starting to put a greater emphasis on working with the media to cause behavior change through these indirect pathways, instead of directly targeting the audience whose behavior they wish to change.

2. Choosing a Specific Focus Audience

Focus audiences should be defined as narrowly as possible, as the more alike members of the audience are, the more likely they are to respond similarly to a given PSA. It is also important to identify relatively receptive groups that are more amenable to influence, and to consider whether your focus will be those whose behavior you want to change, opinion leaders, or policy-makers.

Once the focus audience is chosen, keen attention should be paid to their needs and preferences as the PSA is developed and distributed. Members of the audience should be consulted at the outset (formative evaluation) to gather input for message design. Preliminary versions of messages should be tested to determine potential barriers to success, and audience outcomes should be carefully assessed to determine overall effects and isolate key contributing factors.

3. Creating a Potent Message: Qualitative Features

To be successful, a PSA must first grab the attention of the intended audience. Then, the key message must be retained in the minds of the audience. To do this, it must use an appropriate type of appeal/incentive; use an appropriate messenger; be credible; be understood and be considered relevant by the intended audience. Mechanical construction and creative execution of the message, are also important factors in developing an engaging PSA.

Choosing appeals/incentives

Rather than simply asking individuals to act in a specified way, it is preferable to present message content that links the desired health behavior to valued attributes or consequences that serve as positive incentives (or that links the unhealthy behavior to negative incentives). Appeals for complying with a recommendation should build on existing values of the target audience. There are many types of incentives including physical well-being, time/effort, economic, psychological/aspirational, and social. The most frequently used type is physical health. Negatively- valued unhealthy outcomes (e.g., illness, injury, and premature death) tend to be featured more often than positive reinforcers, such as lengthy lifespan, wellness, and fitness.

Beyond the realm of physical health, there are dozens of potential motivational appeals along other dimensions. In the social incentive category, drug campaigns can present negative appeals about looking uncool, alienating friends, incurring peer disapproval, losing trust of parents, or deviating from social norms. The constellation of psychological incentives might include reduced ability to concentrate, low grades, feeling lazy and unmotivated, losing control, making bad decisions, and anxiety about getting caught or experiencing harm, guilt, and loss of self-respect. Among the economic incentives related to drugs are diminished job prospects, fines, cumulative cost of purchasing drugs, and inability to spend on other needs and desires. Messages can also highlight penalties for violating laws and policies, such as incarceration, loss of driver's license, or suspension from school.

Negative appeals must balance the severity of the consequence with the audience's perceived vulnerability to that consequence. This means that people are most motivated when they believe there is a high likelihood that they will suffer a very painful consequence. In addition, threatening messages are generally more successful if the message provides instructional material demonstrating how to perform behaviors and boosting the confidence that the individual can do so successfully and material convincing the individual that the recommended behavior will reduce the danger.

When the designer is unable to offer any incentives that genuinely link a severe outcome with high probability, the next best approach seems to be to select a mildly severe incentive that is highly probable, rather than one that is very severe but improbable. In the case of drug campaigns, minor negative physical incentives might be loss of stamina, weight gain, or physiological addiction.

Campaigns should diversify by also presenting positive incentives. For each of the negative consequences of performing the proscribed practice, there is usually a mirror-image positive outcome that can be promised for performing the healthy alternative (e.g., avoiding drugs or enjoying a drug-free lifestyle). In the physical health dimension, messages can offer prospects ranging from a longer lifespan to enhanced athletic performance. Positive social incentives include being cool, gaining approval and respect, forming deeper friendships, building trust with parents, and being good role model. On the psychological dimension, messages might promise such outcomes as gaining control over one's life, positive self-image, attaining one's goals, feeling secure, or acting intelligently. Exaggerated rewards may work well as motivators, even though the likelihood is rare; just as negative strategies frequently use long-shot prospects of severe harm, positive approaches could promise lottery-type payoffs that are more believable to positivists. On occasion, the soft-sell approach attempts to associate the desired behavior with positive images.

There are dozens of persuasive appeals that are potentially **effective**, and the degree of potency is fairly equivalent in many cases. Rather than relying on a handful of incentives in a public service campaign, it's advantageous to use multiple appeals across a series of messages to influence different segments of the target audience (especially in media channels where precise targeting is difficult) and to provide several reasons for the individual to comply.

For messages about familiar health subjects, it is important to include some new appeals to complement the standard arguments. Pre-production research can test basic concepts to determine the absolute effectiveness of each one and to examine optimum combinations, and pre-testing research can compare the relative influence of executions of various appeals.

In conveying any appeal, it is often necessary to provide evidence-supporting claims made in the message. The type of evidence that should be featured varies according to each audience. Sophisticated and highly involved individuals are more influenced by messages that cite statistics, provide documentation, and include quotations from experts, whereas dramatized case examples and testimonials by respected sources work better for those who are less involved. The message should demonstrate how the evidence is relevant to the situation experienced by the target audience.

In offering evidence, special care should be taken with the presentation of extreme claims (rare cases, implausible statistics, overly dramatic depictions of consequences), highly biased marshalling of supportive facts, and misleading information. These elements may strain credibility and trigger counter-arguing by audience members.

Selecting a messenger

The *messenger* is the model appearing in message who delivers information, demonstrates behavior, or provides a testimonial. The source messenger is helpful in attracting attention, personalizing abstract concepts by modeling actions and consequences, bolstering belief formation due to source credibility, and facilitating retention due to memorability. Typically, these categories of messengers are featured in health messages:

- ·*Celebrity* (famous athlete or entertainer)
- ·*Public official* (government leader or agency director)
- ·*Expert specialist* (doctor or researcher)
- ·*Organization leader* (hospital administrator or health association executive),
- ·*Professional performer* (standard spokesperson, attractive model, or actor)
- ·*Ordinary real person* (blue-collar man or a middle-class woman)
- ·*Specially experienced person* (victim, survivor, or successful role model)
- ·*Unique character* (animated, anthropomorphic, or costumed).

Although health campaigners conventionally favor certain types of messengers, none is necessarily superior to others in all situations. In selecting the appropriate messenger, the crucial factor is which component of influence model needs a boost. For example, celebrities help draw attention to a dull topic, experts enhance response efficacy, ordinary people heighten self-efficacy, victims convey the severity of harmful outcomes, and victims who share similar characteristics of the audience should augment susceptibility claims. Atkin (1994) provides an elaborate discussion of strengths and weaknesses of various types of messengers.

Credibility

Credibility is the extent to which message content is believed to be accurate and valid. This is primarily conveyed by the trustworthiness and competence of the source messenger and the provision of convincing evidence.

Understandability

Understandability of the message contributes to recipient processing and learning. This is accomplished by presenting materials in a comprehensive and comprehensible manner that is simple, explicit, and sufficiently detailed.

Relevant

To influence behavior, the presentation must be personally involving and relevant, such that the receivers regard the recommendation as applicable to their situation and needs.

High Quality Mechanical Construction

The message designer in structuring and highlighting the important material, primarily to help attract attention and facilitate comprehension and retention, uses a number of technical aspects of message production. Guidelines for constructing key elements:

- ·Theme line (concise representation of main idea with headline, slogan or question)
- ·Continuity devices (distinctive symbols providing common thread across message executions)
- ·Verbal copy (understandable vocabulary, sentence length, copy density)
- ·Arrangement of message elements (primacy vs. recency of key arguments)
- ·Physical dimensions (size of print messages or length of broadcast messages)
- ·Audio and visual factors (use of music or pictures)
- ·Technical production quality (sophisticated techniques and devices).

High Quality Creative Execution

Engaging styles and ideas help attract attention, by using stylistic features that are superficially attractive and entertaining (or arresting), and content that is interesting, mentally stimulating, or emotionally arousing.

Stylistic features are primarily employed to convey substantive ideas in an engaging fashion (via artistic devices such as parody, suspense, sensuality, and wordplay), and can augment the other key message qualities of credibility, understandability, and relevance (via features such as serious tone, memorable slogans, and emotionally involving scenes). Here are basic guidelines:

- ·It's generally **effective** to use entertainment-oriented stylistic approaches for increasing the *attractiveness* of the message. Many message designers *rely* on humor, which has advantages in certain contexts.
- ·*Clever stylistic devices* are a hallmark of health messages, especially the use of a play on words, ironic twist, or catchy slogan to attract interest and provoke thought.
- ·*Vivid presentation styles* such as lively language, striking statements, fascinating facts, and vibrant visuals (and alluring alliteration) are helpful in communicating with low-involvement audiences.
- ·Content should be conveyed in a *realistic and personalized* manner by depicting situations and models that enable the audience to connect the material to their own experiences.
- A serious *tone* is the safest strategy for delivering the substantive arguments, providing the messages are not overly preachy, boring, or bland.
- ·The *rational* style of presentation seems best suited for target responses in which the individual already perceives a need but seeks a solution, for target audiences who are more sophisticated and involved, for sources who are high in competence, and for print channels.
- ·*Emotional* appeals tend to work better in arousing drives and intensifying motivation by highlighting the severity of unhealthy outcomes or the rewards of healthy behavior

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<http://adcouncilcreative.org>

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