

Tips for Creating Effective Public Service Announcements (PSAs) (To Increase Life Jacket Wear)

In 2014 and 2018, The Corps Foundation, in partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), conducted seven different focus groups with a total of 61 men, between the ages of 20 and 60, who didn't wear life jackets most of the time, unless they thought they had to for some reason. These men were asked 10 questions about life jackets, shown 10 water safety video PSAs, and then it was discussed what it would take to change their behavior and get them to wear a life jacket. Their feedback produced the following results which were instrumental in the development of PSAs used in promoting the Life Jackets Worn...Nobody Mourns campaign.

Likes

Realistic
Testimonial-true
Some Humor
Statistics-proof
Emotional/Heartwarming
Positive

Dislikes

Bad acting
Spokespersons
Corny, Cheesy
Law Enforcement
Sexy distracts
Negative

To begin to summarize the likes and dislikes in this list, the men in the focus groups preferred PSAs that were **realistic**. **Testimonials from their peers about actual experiences** were more likely to influence their behavior. They **did not like spokespersons**, especially celebrities, because they believed these people were just being paid to say something whether they believed it or not. **Law enforcement** officials and even park rangers telling them what to do didn't have any impact on them. Any type of "talking head" PSA they were shown did not have any impact on the thoughts or behaviors of these men and they tended to tune out anyone coming across like they were directing them to do something.

Men in the focus groups appreciated a **little humor** in a PSA, but it didn't have any impact on changing their behavior. They perceived themselves to be smarter than people demonstrating obviously risky behavior so they didn't really connect with that type of message. They especially **didn't like PSAs that were corny or cheesy**. Any PSA with **bad acting was another thing that annoyed** focus group participants. One of the PSAs shown to focus groups had strong sexual connotations with a woman wearing a bikini in an embrace with a man talking about using safe protection with some sexy music in the background. The "safe protection" they were referring to was life jackets, but several of the men watching said their minds went somewhere else and they didn't even realize it was a PSA encouraging people to wear life jackets. Several thought it was a condom commercial which proved that **sexy was a distraction** to getting the intended message.

Some men were interested and surprised by **water-related fatality facts and statistics**. For example, USACE public recreation fatality statistics currently show in the past 10-years (2013-2022) that an average of 87% were male, 89% were not wearing a life jacket, and 87% were age 18 and over. They were also surprised to hear things like most people who drown were known swimmers **and most drownings happen on calm, sunny days**. The focus group men didn't perceive calm water as a hazard, but several did express some fear associated with deep water. **The highest cause of drowning (47%) on USACE-managed waters is related to swimming in areas not designated for swimming**. For example, most people drown swimming around boats, off-shore of recreation areas, and beyond beach buoy boundaries. **The second highest cause of drowning is falls at 21% and that includes falls from boats, docks, or shoreline**. In the past five years (2018-2022), the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) reported that 33% of all boating fatalities are from falls in, overboard, and from people being ejected from a vessel. Also in the same time frame, USCG reported that in fatal

incidents 74% of operators had no boating safety instruction and 83% occurred in vessels less than 26-feet in length.

Many men thought that alcohol or drug impairments led to most drownings, but statistics do not prove that, primarily because this information is not available for various reasons. According to USACE statistics since 1998, alcohol is only confirmed in 17% of public fatalities and suspected in 4% more. The USCG reports that alcohol use is the leading known contributing factor in fatal boating accidents; where the primary cause is known. However, from 2018 to 2022 USCG listed alcohol as a leading factor for an average of 18% of deaths.

There was considerable discussion about whether positive messages where someone survived a water-related incident or negative messages where someone died were more appealing to men. The consensus was that a **positive message had more impact** on them. They said they see so many gruesome images in video games, television, and movies that they're immune to being affected by it. They perceived the negative images as this isn't going to happen to me because "I'm smarter than that."

Simply passing on knowledge and information to adults about why they should wear a life jacket rarely changes behavior. An effective PSA targeting adults needs to connect to them individually in some way so they can relate to it. Videos with children have considerable impact on adults who have children and videos with dogs have a similar affect. **Heartwarming videos can create emotional connections with men and can make them want wear a life jacket, even if they haven't usually done that in the past.**

By far the types of PSAs that had the most impact on men in the focus groups were the ones that generated some type of emotional or heartwarming appeal. The [Man Overboard PSA](#) was created based on this concept. A similar PSA to this one that was shown during the focus groups changed the minds of several men who claimed there was nothing we could do or say in a PSA that would make them wear a life jacket.

In addition to what was learned from men in focus groups, world-renowned educator, interpretive specialist, and risk communication expert Sam Ham contacted the developers of the Life Jackets Worn...Nobody Mourns campaign to compliment them and explain how they're successfully using various psychological methods that can effectively change behavior. There's a psychological model called Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) in risk communication that is based on the cognitive effects of fear appeals. Dr. R.W. Rogers first proposed PMT in 1975. Rogers saw fear as a thought process or assessment that leads to a behavior change. Forty years of research into PMT has proven that people have to perceive some degree of threat or vulnerability in order to be motivated to protect themselves. Therefore, adults may need to feel a little vulnerable to the threat of drowning to be motivated to wear a life jacket. **There has to be a balance in motivating someone to protect themselves and not just scaring them away by evoking too much fear.**

Another psychological explanation for how people may change their behavior is social norms. Norms are unwritten, but understood, rules of society or cultural behavior. An example of a personal norm changing a behavior is a guy who doesn't wear a life jacket for himself, but he does wear it because of being influenced by a loved one. An example of a social norm is where the more people see others wearing life jackets designed for whatever water-related recreational activity they enjoy then they will be more likely to wear life jackets too.

This is just a summary of some methods, along with focus group feedback, that can help you create more effective PSAs that can help change life jacket wear behavior in adults.