

Workplace safety: A review of best practice for mass media campaigns

Wundersitz, L.

Centre for Automotive Safety Research, The University of Adelaide

Abstract

Mass media campaigns can play an important role in promoting safe behavioural practices to a large part of the population. This paper provides a summary of the current state of knowledge regarding best practice for workplace health and safety (WHS) mass media campaign design and evaluation. While this review primarily focused on workplace safety, findings relevant to road safety are highlighted. An industry review was undertaken to investigate the specific role of mass media in promoting WHS issues. Interviews with key personnel involved in WHS communications campaigns provided insights into the processes involved in developing and evaluating mass media campaigns. Australian and international public health literature published during the last decade was also reviewed to examine what elements make a WHS mass media campaign effective and how future campaigns might be enhanced. Recent WHS campaign evaluations were reviewed to highlight current key issues in WHS campaign evaluation research. The paper concludes with some principles for best practice in mass media campaigns promoting safety in the workplace and within the road system.

Keywords

Workplace health and safety, mass media, campaign effectiveness, advertising

Introduction

It is estimated that around 640,700 workers experience a work-related injury or illness in Australia each year (ABS, 2010). In addition, approximately 375 people in Australia die each year as a result of work-related traumatic injuries (Safe Work Australia, 2012). Occupational injuries and illnesses can have a severe impact on workers, their families, employers and the wider community. Workplace health and safety (WHS) organisations are increasingly using mass media campaigns, amongst other initiatives, to enhance worker safety. The use of mass media campaigns is based on the premise that targeting the population as a whole has the benefits of potentially altering the knowledge or attitudes of a large proportion of the population and providing social support for behaviour change (Redman, Spencer & Sanson-Fisher, 1990).

The aim of this study was to build on existing collective WHS knowledge by improving the evidence base for conducting effective WHS mass media campaigns. This paper provides a summary of the current state of knowledge regarding best practice for WHS mass media campaigns. These findings are also relevant to road safety mass media campaigns.

Method

In order to determine best practice for WHS mass media campaigns, recently published Australian and international public health mass media literature was reviewed and an industry review was undertaken. The industry review focused on ascertaining what role mass media

has in promoting WHS both in Australia and overseas. The industry review also provided a description of very recent WHS campaigns and perceptions as to what works and what does not work in these campaigns from the people who have designed and implemented them. Communications managers from New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, Canada, The United Kingdom and New Zealand provided responses to a series of questions.

Australian and international public health literature published during the last decade (2001-2010) was also reviewed to examine what elements make an WHS mass media campaign effective and how future campaigns might be enhanced. While the primary focus was on literature examining workplace injury prevention, the disciplines covered in the literature search included: WHS, Psychology, Public Health, Communications, Marketing and Media, Road Safety, Transport, and Humanities and Social Sciences. The literature review specifically focused on:

- New issues associated with campaign development such as message content, type of appeal and message delivery
- The efficacy of threat appeals and alternatives
- Evaluations of WHS mass media campaigns

Results and Discussion

Industry review

- Respondents had realistic expectations about what mass media campaigns can achieve. Mass media is used for agenda setting and to raise awareness of broad WHS issues with only a minor role in changing behaviour.
- Tactical or targeted activities are preferred for campaigns communicating specific messages for specific groups or industries.
- The decision to use mass media is dependent on factors such as the type of message, the size of the target audience and the resources available.
- There was much variation in the frequency, size and intensity of campaigns between jurisdictions, which reflected differences in budgets and the level of resources available.

The literature search identified over 180 mass media related publications from the public health domain. Of these around 45 specifically related to WHS mass media campaigns suggesting this is an area of limited published knowledge. The review of this literature suggests the following principles might enhance the effectiveness of WHS mass media campaigns, of which many are also applicable to road safety mass media campaigns.

Campaign development

- Use a psychological theory as a conceptual base for the campaign. Health-related mass media campaigns appear to be more successful when a well-researched psychological theory of behaviour change is used to develop the campaign (e.g. Noar, 2006; Randolph & Viswanath, 2004). At present, few WHS campaigns are guided by theoretical framework.
- The campaign objectives must be clearly defined and appropriate variables should be selected that can measure whether these objectives were achieved (e.g. Delhomme et al., 2009).
- Identify the target behaviour and target group through data driven and systematic processes (e.g. Noar, 2006).
- Segment the target audience then tailor the message and communication channels according to their motivations and preferences. One style of message may work for one audience but not another (e.g. Atkin, 2001; Strecher et al., 2006; Ulleberg, 2001).

- Combine different types of media to reach as many as possible in the target audience (e.g. Delhomme et al., 2009; Dijkstra, Buijtsels, & van Raaij, 2005).
- Integrate mass media campaigns with other activities such as education initiatives, enforcement (i.e. inspections) and community engagement (e.g. Elliott, 1993; Mustard & Bielecky, 2007).
- Evidence from back pain mass media campaigns (Gross et al., 2010; Waddell et al., 2007) suggest messages need to make explicit behavioural recommendations relating to the work context.
- Provide sufficient resources to reach the target audience and to sustain appropriate exposure to the campaign (e.g. Mustard & Bielecky, 2007).

Threat appeals

- Fear based appeals are often used in campaigns targeting young workers. Despite much research, the literature examining the effectiveness of threat appeals is inconclusive. There are some suggestions that fear appeals can have an impact but only when specific conditions are met. The fear appeal must describe a threat (severity and susceptibility) and suggest a specific plan for reducing the threat (e.g. a safe behaviour) that is possible to carry out, perceived as effective, and allows the target audience to believe that they are capable of performing the safe behaviour (Donovan et al, 2005). Without all of these elements individuals may believe that they are unable to protect themselves from the threat resulting in defensive and maladaptive responses (e.g. Elliot, 2003). On this basis, fear appeals should be used with caution in the WHS context.
- Emerging research from road safety suggests response efficacy (belief that a message provides an effective and useful coping strategy) may also influence the effectiveness of positive emotional appeals (e.g. humour) (see Lewis, Watson & White, 2010). Given the current interest in emotional appeals in Australian WHS campaigns this should be a focus of future research.

Evaluations of WHS campaigns

There were very few published evaluations of WHS mass media campaigns and the quality of evaluations varied.

- Where possible, evaluations should be based on before and after comparisons of work-related behaviours or variables (e.g. injury incidence) that can be objectively observed and are closely linked to workplace safety.
- Behaviour change might occur many years after a campaign ends but longer-term effects are largely unknown and are difficult to measure.
- Findings from evaluations of WHS campaigns should be widely disseminated and published in the peer-reviewed literature.

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