

# Preparing Public Service Announcements

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"This is your brain. This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?"

"A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

"Friends don't let friends drive drunk."

How many of these phrases ring a bell? These widely recognized slogans from national public service announcement campaigns by the Ad Council have become a part of our culture.

## What is a public service announcement?

Public service announcements, or PSA's, are short messages produced on film, videotape, DVD, CD, audiotape, or as a computer file and given to radio and television stations. Generally, PSA's are sent as ready-to-air audio or video tapes, although radio stations (especially community or public stations, such as campus radio or National Public Radio affiliates) sometimes prefer a script that their announcers can read live on the air. They can be done very simply with a single actor reading or performing a message, or they can be elaborate, slickly-produced messages with music, dramatic story-lines, and sound or visual effects.

Broadcast media -- radio and television -- are required by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to serve "in the public interest." Most stations use PSA's as one of the ways they meet this requirement.

### Advantages of PSA's

- PSA's are generally inexpensive. Since the airtime is donated, your only cost is production. If you keep to a tight budget, you can make PSA's very cheaply.
- Most stations will allow you to include a telephone number for more information in your PSA.

### Limitations of PSA's

- Because PSA's depend on donated time, you'll often find you're not able to get them run on all the media outlets you'd like to, or you may find yourself at the mercy of station staff members who may be overworked, arbitrary, or personally opposed to your group's work. PSA's are often run as "filler" in the middle of the night or during other times when only a few people are listening or watching.
- Stations tend to shy away from "controversial" PSA's. If your group focuses on an issue that is the subject of heated public debate -- anti-abortion advocacy or gay rights, for example -- you may have a hard time convincing stations to run your PSA.
- Stations may not track and report when your PSA's have been played, but they will do this for paid advertising.
- PSA's do require a bit of work on your part, and they tend to be ineffective at influencing policy. Consider them more when you have a specific action you want the viewer or listener to take, or coordinate with other activities designed to influence people's behavior.

## When should you consider using PSA's?

Here are some guidelines for deciding when you might want to incorporate PSA's into your media campaign. Keep in mind that you don't necessarily have to meet all of these criteria -- this is just a list of times that PSA's may be a good idea for your group:

- When your group is a nonprofit organization
- When you have a specific announcement to make (for example, the time and place of a meeting or event).
- When you have a clear and easy-to-understand issue
- When you're requesting a very specific action

## How do you write a PSA?

Decide upon and clarify the purpose of your PSA. What are your goals here? What do you want to accomplish by putting a PSA on the air? And for that matter, why use a PSA instead of other publicity outlets?

- Target your audience. What type of people are you hoping to reach through your PSA? This will help you focus in both your desired media outlets, and also upon your PSA content.

Approach your preferred media outlets. Here you want to make a personal contact, as best you can, directly with the station manager in small markets, or with the person who's responsible for choosing PSA's for broadcast. A phone call is good; a personal meeting is better. Find out a bit about their requirements for PSA's -- what format they want to receive them in, preferred length, when to submit them, etc. See "How do you get your PSA on the air?" later on in this section for more detailed information on how to go about this.

Write your PSA. The actual writing waits until this point, because you first need to know your audience, your markets, and their policies.

### Key points to remember about the writing:

- Because you've only got a few seconds to reach your audience (often 30 seconds or less), the language should be simple and vivid. Take your time and make every word count. Make your message crystal clear.
- The content of the writing should have the right "hooks" -- words or phrases that grab attention -- to attract your audience (again, you need to know who your audience is). For example, starting your PSA off with something like, "If you're between the ages of 25 and 44, you're more likely to die from AIDS than from any other disease."
- The PSA should usually (though maybe not 100% of the time) request a specific action, such as calling a specific number to get more information. You ordinarily want listeners to do something as a result of having heard the PSA.

### Getting ready to write your PSA:

*Choose points to focus on.* Don't overload the viewer or listener with too many different messages. List all the possible messages you'd like to get into the public mind, and then decide on the one or two most vital points.

*Brainstorm.* This is also a good time to look at the PSA's that others have done for ideas. Get together with your colleagues to toss around ideas about ways you can illustrate the main point(s) you've chosen.

*Check your facts.* It's extremely important for your PSA to be accurate. Any facts should be checked and verified before sending the PSA in. Is the information up to date? If there are any demonstrations included in the PSA, are they done clearly and correctly?

*Identify a "hook".* A hook is whatever you use to grab the listener or viewer's attention. How are you going to keep them from changing the channel or leaving the room or letting their attention drift when your PSA comes on? A hook can be something funny, it can be catchy music, it can be a shocking statistic, it can be an emotional appeal -- whatever makes the listener or viewer interested enough to watch or listen to the rest of your PSA.

## **Basic guidelines for PSA format:**

Most stations prefer 30-second spots. If you're writing a television PSA, you'll want to keep the announcer's copy 2 or 3 seconds shorter than the entire length of the PSA. Television stations run on a much tighter, more rigid schedule than radio stations, and you may find that if your PSA runs exactly 30 seconds, for example, the station may sometimes cut off the end.

<b>Length of PSA</b>	10 seconds	15 seconds	20 seconds	30 seconds
<b>Number of words</b>	20-25 words	30-35 words	40-50 words	60-75 words

Your copy should be typed, double spaced.

You can put more than one spot per page for the shorter ones, but with 30 and 60 second spots, put them on separate pages.

The top of the sheet should list:

- how long the PSA should run (i.e., "FOR USE: November 18 - December 20")
- length of the PSA
- what agency or group the PSA is for, and
- title of the PSA.

The bottom of the sheet should be marked with "####", the standard ending used in releases to the media to let the media outlet know there are no further pages to the script or story.

Your script can be sent as "live copy"-- a simple script that's ready to be read by a live on-air announcer -- or as a pre-recorded tape. While live copy is inexpensive and is used extensively in radio, television stations rarely use live copy scripts.

Below is an example of a live copy PSA script for radio. Two longer scripts -- one for radio and one for television -- are shown with the other examples at the end of this section.

### **Sample radio PSA script -- live copy**

Use: June 1 to June 20, 2014

Time: 20 seconds

Agency: Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

Title: "Day of Compassion"

Main Point: Day of Compassion will be held June 20. Fifteen years ago, most people thought it couldn't happen to them. Today we know better. AIDS has taken more than 320,000 lives nationwide. It could happen to someone you love. Turn on your radio or TV on June 20th and experience a Day of Compassion. It could save lives. Be aware. Be safe. Be compassionate.

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## How do you produce a PSA?

*Tips for radio:*

- Finding professional announcers is helpful but not vital. Volunteers at community or campus radio stations, people who read for the blind, and storytellers are all experienced in doing voiceover work. Just keep your target group in mind when choosing actors. People tend to respond better to those who sound like they might be their approximate age and background.
- In radio, your audience is usually doing at least one other thing in addition to listening; driving, reading, partying, studying, working, gardening, cleaning, etc. It's important to grab the audience's attention quickly and hold it.
- Try to use short, arresting sentences aimed directly at the listener at the beginning of the PSA to help grab their attention. For example: "Your heart could be a ticking time bomb. Has one or both of your parents had heart disease? If so, your chances of developing heart disease later in life are a lot higher than for most people."

Chances are good that you can get help from your local community access cable TV station. Many of them also offer free production courses, which could be useful to you if you might be producing videos on a regular basis.

Many local cable TV stations also do "scrolls," or community-calendar type announcements. Your message might also be included as one of these. The announcement is often 25-50 words of copy, sometimes even less, and is often written similarly to a radio PSA. Check with your cable TV station for details.

## How do you get your PSA on the air?

Different stations have different policies for PSA's. For example, in some small communities, you can just call in your PSA by telephone. Other stations require the PSA script, while others require a fully produced, ready-to-air version. Find out ahead of time what their requirements are -- never send a PSA without knowing the rules and guidelines of the station first. Stations also vary around maximum PSA length and minimum advance notice. In other words, you want to know what the local ground rules are before you take to the field.

### **Radio**

It's generally a lot easier to get a PSA run on the radio than on television. Once you're familiar with submission requirements, send your PSA, following station guidelines. This will normally include a cover letter, along with any specific requests or instructions.

Even if you've already talked to your contact on the phone or in person you should take care to write a good cover letter when you send your PSA in. Mention previous conversations with the contact, and any specific air times you've discussed. Be sure to list any and all enclosed items or additional pages. And, most importantly, be appreciative! Follow up with a phone call a few days later.