



Evaluating Substance Use Prevention Campaign Messages for Youth Audiences

This resource, which focuses on evaluating campaign messages, is part of a series developed by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) to assist substance use prevention workers in developing and evaluating youth substance use prevention campaigns.

All campaign messages should be evidence-informed and tailored to your specific target audience, in this case, youth. By using the [Ethical Youth Engagement](#) tool from this series, you can ensure that youth are meaningfully and actively involved in the decision-making process for all aspects of campaign development, including message creation and evaluation. The [Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkit](#) (Krank, 2012) can guide you in evaluating your campaigns and other prevention initiatives.

When conducting evaluations to determine the effectiveness and impact of prevention campaigns, it is impossible to separate the messages from the other campaign components (e.g., materials, formats, messengers, channels). Instead, campaign messages are evaluated through pre-testing during a **formative evaluation**.

Formative Evaluations

Formative evaluations are used to ensure the campaign's intended messages will reach the right audiences and so ensure the campaign's overall effectiveness.

Pre-testing or piloting is the process of systematically gathering audience reactions to and understanding of preliminary versions of campaign messages before final production. Several methods can be used to pre-test your messaging, including focus group discussions, interviews and questionnaires. (For campaigns directed toward youth audiences, be sure to pre-test with a representative sample of youth.) Readability testing, plain language assessments and expert reviews can also be used.

Because formative evaluations aim to improve the program (in this case, a prevention campaign) before its implementation, they are usually carried out during the early stages of campaign development. However, they can also be conducted at various times throughout the campaign as its messages, issues or target audiences evolve.

Types of Evaluation

Many types of evaluations can be used to determine the effectiveness of prevention campaigns.

Formative evaluation: Pre-testing of messages and materials, usually during the early stages of campaign development

Process evaluation: Monitoring of activities during the campaign as well as the actions being taken to improve the campaign

Outcome evaluation: Assessing whether the campaign had the intended effect

Impact evaluation: Assessing whether the campaign had intended or unintended effects

Cost-effectiveness/cost-benefit analysis: Comparing the relative costs of achieving the intended outcome(s)



Why Pre-test Campaign Messages?

Pre-test campaign messages to:

- Ensure your themes and messages reach their intended audiences;
- Save time and money by enabling changes to be made that will make the campaign more effective before it is launched;
- Produce positive results that ensure early buy-in from organizational partners and end users; and
- Determine the key attributes of your messages.

Assessing the Effectiveness of Campaign Messages

The questions below are useful to ask during the pre-testing of your campaign messages.

Message attributes	Pre-testing questions
Overall reaction to the campaign	How does the message make you feel?
Key message communication and comprehension	What do you think the message is trying to tell you? Are any aspects of the message confusing?
Preferences	Specifically, what do you like or dislike about the message or campaign? Why?
Consistency	Are you hearing or seeing similar or different messages across campaign materials?
Relevance or audience identification with messages	At whom do you think the message is aimed? Is the message relevant to you? Why or why not?
Cultural relevance and appropriateness	Is there anything in the message that is offensive to you? Do you feel that any of the messages could be offensive to others?
Believability	Is the message believable? Why or why not?
Novelty	What new information, if any, did you learn from the message?
Newsworthiness or “stickiness”	Which message are you most likely to talk about with others? Why or why not? Will you talk about the campaign after you have seen it? Why or why not? What is the one thing that you will remember most about this message or campaign?
Controversy	Is the message controversial? Why or why not?
Consistency with existing beliefs or knowledge	Is the message consistent with what you might have heard from other sources? What impact do these inconsistencies have on you? What, if anything, surprised you?
Actionability	Will the message prompt you to change your views or behaviour? Why or why not?

Source: Table adapted from the Mass Media Taskforce (2008)



Additional Tools and Resources

To inform the development of this tool, CCSA commissioned a review of existing tools that evaluate the effectiveness of prevention campaign messages and their effectiveness related to substance use prevention. Many of the tools reviewed are listed below. It should be noted that few tools focused specifically on campaign messages and that no evaluations of any of these tools could be found, meaning their impact on substance use prevention initiatives is unknown. In addition, appraisal of these tools revealed that the evidence that informed their development is lacking.

To suggest other tools and resources that could be useful in evaluating youth prevention campaign messages, send an email message to Youth-Jeunes@ccsa.ca.

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