

# HOW TO WRITE A PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

Or

## **How To Write A Public Service Announcement That Is Worth Airing, Worth Hearing, And Worth Writing!**

Before we begin, please decide: Do you want to: A) Create a message that no one hears? or B) Create a message that someone does hear? If your answer is "A," you can stop reading right now. It doesn't take any knowledge, ability or talent to create a bad Public Service Announcement. Still here? Great. Let's get going.....

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## **What Is A Public Service Announcement?**

A Public Service Announcement (PSA) is a free “commercial” for a non-profit organization. It is aired voluntarily by individual radio and/or TV stations.

### **But To The Audience.....**

To the audience, a PSA is just another commercial.

So to learn how to write an effective PSA, you need to understand how to create an effective commercial. Whether you call it “commercial” or “PSA,” to the audience it’s all advertising.

### **But I’m Not Very “Creative!”**

This might surprise you, but you don’t need to be “creative” to create great advertising. If you know how to communicate effectively in an everyday conversation, you **can** create an effective PSA.

### **How Do I Start?**

You start with the **goal** of the PSA: What do you want it to accomplish? Once you know the goal, then you can figure out how the PSA can achieve it.

### **What Is The Goal of a PSA?**

The goal of a PSA is simple: To get someone to take a **specific action**. It’s **not** to talk about the sponsoring organization. It’s to motivate the targeted audience to **act**: To drop off the canned goods for the food drive. To make sure their children’s seat belts are buckled. To stay in school....To stop smoking....To avoid abusing drugs.

## **Is It Important Enough?**

Your first question must be, “Is this message important enough to broadcast?”

Your second question must be, “Is this message relevant to the broadcast audience?”

You might have a local Stamp Collecting Society, legally organized as a non-profit organization. Technically, that Stamp Collecting Society meets the requirements of a PSA sponsor.

Perhaps the Stamp Collecting Society wants a local station to broadcast a PSA that tells people the time and location of the society’s next regularly scheduled meeting.

Should the station air such a PSA? Probably not.

Because:

The message is relevant to very few members of the audience.

The Stamp Collecting Society can contact every member (via mail, fax, telephone, its website and/or e-mail) without utilizing the public airwaves.

## **The More Vital, The Less Universal It Needs To Be.**

But “what percentage of the audience will be affected” is not the only aspect to consider.

Maybe there’s a deadly disease that afflicts 5% of children between the ages of 5 and 10. For 95% of the children in your audience (or, more appropriately, 95% of the children of the parents in your audience), a PSA describing the 10 Warning Signs of this disease is irrelevant.

But for the remaining 5%, that PSA might be the difference between life and death.

So the two key criteria for a station’s broadcast of a PSA should be:

How relevant it is to the mass audience.

How important it is to the target audience.

## **Talk Only About The Results.**

Most people who write PSAs do so from the point-of-view of the sponsoring organization:

“The Smallville Homeless Shelter is holding its annual food drive from Monday, November 1 until Friday, November 26. If you would like to participate, please bring your canned goods to one of several drop-off points which are located at....”

Who is that PSA about? The Smallville Homeless Shelter.

What is about? Their annual food drive.

But notice how easy it is to talk about the **results** of the food drive:

“A can of food probably doesn’t mean that much to you. You probably have a cupboard full of them. But just a few of those cans will keep a Smallville family from going hungry tonight....”

## **Use Real Language.**

Ever notice how some commercials speak in a language that you only seem to hear in commercials? “Our quality merchandise and competitive prices....Our friendly, knowledgeable staff....Our wide selection from which to choose....”

Don’t speak that language in your PSA!

But if you don’t use the kind of artificial language you hear in some commercials, what language **can** you use? The language you use every day. Instead of, “To obtain participation details,” you say, “To find out how to participate.” Or, even better, “To find out how you can help feed a hungry family.”

## **Use Emotion.**

People act based on emotional reasons.

They might “rationalize” their actions with logic. But they’re motivated by emotions. Can you think of a movie that you really, really wanted to see? If so, undoubtedly your desire was emotional: You heard it was funny or scary or suspenseful. You didn’t “analyze” all of your movie options, draw up a list of pro’s and con’s for each, and then acting solely on logic select the one film that seemed to be the most “rational” choice. Facts don’t sell. (Note: By “sell,” we mean “motivate a person to act.”)

Emotions sell. Let’s add some emotion to the PSA we’ve already started: “Tonight, many of Smallville’s children will go to bed hungry. Unless you help.”

## **Make It Personally Relatable.**

A PSA is nothing more than a conversation with the audience.

Make your message personal to them; make it easy for them to relate to:

“Have you ever been hungry? Not because you’re on a diet or you didn’t have time to eat breakfast, but because you don’t have enough money to buy food? Can you imagine what it’s like for a child to go to bed hungry every night? Unfortunately, that’s not an imaginary situation for 13,000 children in Smallville. At the Smallville Homeless Shelter, we know you’d like to help. That’s why we’ve made it easy for you to drop off your canned goods at any XYZ Store, all this month. Please take a look at your shelves and see what you can afford to donate. There’s a child in our community who will go to bed hungry tonight...unless you help.”

## **Identify The Organization.**

The sponsoring organization must be identified within the PSA. If you reread the PSA we just wrote, you’ll how how easy it is to smoothly blend in the organization’s name with the message.

## **Deliver Exactly One “Core Message”**

The “core message” is the **one** thing you want the audience to hear, to understand, and to remember. Many PSAs (and many commercials) make the mistake of trying to get the audience to do more than one thing.

A PSA can ask people to donate food. Or money. Or time. But it shouldn’t ask for all three. One message. And to deliver that message effectively, you must do so with...

## **Clarity**

**You** know what your PSA is about, because you’re the one who created it. But the audience doesn’t have the advantage of your inside knowledge. The audience needs to be able to understand the message the first time it airs.

So in addition to making sure you have just one Core Message, you also must make it very clear. It’s your job to communicate. It’s not the audience’s job to figure out what you really mean.

## **Music**

“All commercials and PSAs should have music underneath them,” right? Wrong. Use music only when it enhances the impact of the message. Some people automatically put a “music bed” underneath an announcer’s voice “to make it more interesting.”

Think of a glass of soda that has “gone flat” — all the carbonation has disappeared. Putting music under a boring message doesn’t make it interesting...any more than pouring flat soda into a fancier glass makes it taste better.

### **Sound Effects**

Sound effects are fun. And dangerous. Every sound effect you use **will stimulate a picture** in your audience’s mind. **Example:** A PSA that encourages people not to overspend on their credit card accounts. To illustrate the point of “not spending extra money,” the sound effect of a cash register ringing is used. The audience pictures a cash register. But does picturing a cash register do anything to encourage people to use their credit cards responsibly? (On the other hand, getting them to picture their savings accounts growing larger....Or to picture being able to answer the phone without worrying that it’s a creditor demanding money....Could be effective.) Please, **don’t** use sound effects just because they’re fun to use.

As with music, use them only if they increase the impact of the message you’re trying to communicate.

### **How Long Should It Be?**

Usually the length of your PSA is determined by the broadcast station that might air yet. Most often, it’s either 30 seconds or 60 seconds.

Remember, the station isn’t **required** to broadcast your PSA. So you’ll want it to match the station’s preferred length.

### **Who Is The PSA For, Anyway?**

A good public service announcement is for the good of the community. For it to do good for the community, your PSA must:

- Attract the attention of your target audience
- Speak to the audience in their own language
- Relate to the audience’s lives
- Deliver a single core message
- Deliver the message with clarity
- Motivate the audience to act.

And before it can do all that, it must accomplish one other goal: Get played on the TV or radio station! It’s not enough to say, “Please play this PSA because it’s very important to us.” You must be able to say, “You should play this PSA because it’s very important to your audience and to your community