

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. 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.

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.
- PSA's tend to be really effective at encouraging the audience to do something -- for example, call a phone number for more information, stay away from drugs, or have your pet spayed or neutered.
- PSA's can raise awareness of your issue.

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?

Target your audience. What type of people are you hoping to reach through your PSA? This will help you focus on your PSA content.

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).
- 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. For example, if your group educates people about asthma, you might narrow it down to a simple focus point like, "If you have asthma, you shouldn't smoke."

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. If possible, include members of your target group in this process.

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:

PSAs should aim to fill a 30-second spot.

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

The top of the sheet should list:

- length of the PSA
- what agency or group the PSA is for, and
- title of the PSA.

Pretesting your script is always a good idea. Find some people who are members of your target audience, show them or let them read the script for the PSA, and ask them for critical feedback. Whatever amount of time you spend pretesting will almost always pay off in greater effectiveness of your PSA.

How do you produce a PSA?

Overall tips

Keep it brief and simple! Focus on what you want the viewer to do or remember after they see or hear your PSA. Stick to having only two or three main characters in the PSA to help your audience focus on the message. Let the actors give you feedback and make suggestions on the script. They will appreciate that you take their input seriously, and they often have great ideas. When information changes (for example, with AIDS PSA's, where new treatments are being developed all the time), change your PSA's as soon as possible. Contact the station(s) playing it and get them to stop running old material, and produce new PSA's with updated information as quickly as you can. Talk with your actors and production staff about payment or donated time, and have a written agreement in place before production begins.

How can you tell if your PSA was effective?

The best way to judge effectiveness is to request a specific action, and then to monitor the actions taken. For example, if you're requesting listeners to call a number, then you measure the number of calls received before the PSA aired. The same applies if you're asking for postcards.

Alternatively, if you were asking for attendance at an event, you could both measure attendance and also ask those attending how they heard about the event, and note the percent mentioning PSA's.

Once it's on the air, see if you can use the PSA to get more extensive media coverage, such as a media story on your work, or being a guest on a panel show, or possibly -- depending on the station and the media market -- being able to do a radio editorial or getting editorial reply time. This is using the principal of leverage, a very powerful principle in doing community work.

Finally, as noted before, pre-testing should help you [figure out how effective a PSA may or may not be](#).

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Online Resource

[Family Health Institute](#) (1997). Behavior change through mass communication.

[How to Use Public Service Announcements](#), prepared by aspencsg.org.

[How to Write a Public Service Announcement that is Worth Airing, Worth Hearing and Worth Writing](#), by Kansas Association of Broadcasters, contains helpful examples and is written in a friendly, conversational tone.

[Tips for Creating a Public Service Announcement](#), by preventionlinks.org, includes information on graphics, and on how to make a storyboard.