



## public service announcements

### What is a Public Service Announcement?

A public service announcement (PSA) is a public relations tool used to publicize a variety of causes, such as a local community event or a health or safety related message from a nonprofit service via individual radio and/or TV stations. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requires broadcast stations to donate a certain amount of airtime to PSAs.

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 creative

You don’t need to be a “creative person” to create a PSA. 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 or to stop smoking
- ⇒ 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?”

Should the station air a PSA about a meeting or new menu item? Probably not.

Because:

- The message is relevant to very few members of the station’s audience
- An organization can contact those interested in the meeting (via email, telephone, its website) without utilizing the public airwaves.

### Is it relevant?

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

Most people who write PSAs do so from the point-of-view of the sponsoring organization. Your PSA should use emotion. People act based on emotional reasons. They might “rationalize” their actions with logic. But they’re motivated by emotions.

### Example with no emotion

“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....”

- Whom is that PSA about? The Smallville Homeless Shelter.
- What is about? Their annual food drive.

### Emotions sell. Let’s add some emotion

“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.”

**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!

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.”

### Identify the organization

The sponsoring organization must be identified within the PSA. If you reread the above PSA example, you’ll see 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.

Don’t try to get the audience to do a number of things (e.g., come to the event AND donate money AND hashtag the experience AND submit photos).

**Only one core message:** Come to the event

## Be Clear

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.**

## Should I use music or sound effects?

If you are recording your own PSA only use music 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." Putting music under a boring message doesn't make it interesting.

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 the PSA Be?

Usually the length of your PSA is determined by the broadcast station that might air it. Most often, it's either 15 seconds 30 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. Call/email and ask their preference.

## Who is the PSA for?

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."

## The Details

Time yourself reading the **PSA** aloud at a slow pace, as a **radio** announcer would do. If the spot is too long, rewrite it until it matches the **PSA** length required by the **radio** station.

- A **PSA should** include a hook, essentially something to grab the listener or viewer's attention. ... One other critical piece is that **PSAs should** end with a specific ask and/or answer what you want the reader/listener/viewer to do after they've heard your message (call to action).

**Format your PSA:**

Header to include title

- Double space the text (the D.J. may write in something to add)
- Head each version with the total seconds
  - 15 second version; 30 second version; 60 second version
  - Make sure the key details are included: Who, what, when, where, time, cost, phone # or website URL
- For TV: Leave the toll-free telephone number, or website URL on screen as long as possible
- Search for radio stations in your area
- Email each station individually asking them what length PSAs they prefer
- You might consider sending your PSA in 15, 30 and 60 second versions. That way the station can choose which length may fit the space they have available
- Include your PSA in the email, not as an attachment
- Make follow-up calls. Many stations only have a generic contact form

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