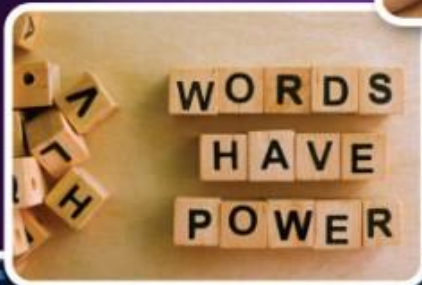


DISCOVERING ANSWERS

Research Methods for Public Relations

Donnalyn Pompper



Sidebar 7.1 Using numbers to connect with consumers and help save lives

When strategy and creativity organically emerge from formal research, successful public relations campaigns are born. The nonprofit UL's Firefighter Safety Research Institute (FSRI) and the public relations agency, Allison+Partners, won a Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Silver Anvil award in 2019 for their *Close Before You Doze* campaign designed to inform people about the importance of sleeping with the bedroom door closed at night. This simple act creates a barrier to smoke and flames, offering people time to implement their escape plan in the event of a home fire. FSRI's Director of Research Amplification, Zoe Susice, and Allison+Partners' Senior Vice President Research, Katie Malark, explained how formal research is this campaign's real hero.

#CloseBeforeYouDoze emerged from over a decade of fire dynamics research conducted by FSRI together with the fire service aimed at helping firefighters do their job more effectively, efficiently, and safely. "The importance of *closed doors* kept coming up," Susice explained, "and I remember the initial conversation in a leadership meeting and said, 'This is a big deal. I don't think anybody knows this. We've got to talk about this!'"

At least three distinct research components of the campaign led to unqualified success in impacting consumer behavior change and garnering significant media attention and social media engagement.



Katie Malark



Zoe Susice

Multi-pronged formal research steps

The first steps toward developing a messaging approach involved FSRI team members analyzing what already was known about firefighters' experiences with house fires as well as what types of public service messages had proved successful in driving behavior change. "This group had never done any kind of PSA or consumer marketing," Susice explained. She added, "The first thing we did was to perform a content analysis on what had been successful in terms of public safety announcements, globally. We looked at all the top awards won around the world and found some emerging themes like *facts can be very, very impactful*. Data mean something to people. The analysis also showed that many successful public safety announcements also have an *emotive component* – fear or humor – to deliver the facts in an engaging way. We realized that to get this message out there, we needed to have something that would connect with consumers."

These important early findings enabled the FSRI team to develop a brief, or synopsis of the problem/opportunity that they shared with potential public relations agencies before selecting the one that would create and implement a public service campaign. "We bottled up all the research findings we discovered from the content analysis and our learnings across the previous years and drew up a brief that we RFP'd (request for proposal) out to several agencies," Susice said. We established objective criteria developed by evaluators in various disciplines to choose the agency that we wanted to help us. We chose the San Francisco-based global public relations agency, Allison+Partners, to develop a public safety campaign. It was a great move because they

came back with an amazing concept that hit on both those facts we had found, and they developed an emotive way to bring it to life with a point of view so each person could relate with the content.”

Next, Allison+Partners conducted a consumer perception study using a nationally representative survey to collect newsworthy facts about people’s awareness about house fire, prevention, and safety. Malark said: “We’ve conducted this survey four years running. What’s really interesting is that it helps us use one instrument to address multiple objectives – creating content for the campaign based on consumer awareness of why it is important to close the door when you go to sleep, garnering news media coverage of the fact that many people don’t know about the safety benefits of doing so, and then using the survey findings to benchmark the campaign itself. This enabled us to gauge if people are aware of the campaign and if it is persuading them to change their behavior. Are they taking that potentially life-saving step of closing their door before they go to sleep? It’s rare you’re able to get that many objectives in one survey. Credit to our client (FSRI) for being so research minded and working with us to incorporate all those different aspects of data in that one instrument. So, it’s a combination of storytelling, measurement, and behavioral change.”

A third data-based dimension of the campaign included creating a video to share across media platforms. Susice explained, “During a brainstorming meeting, we thought we’d show an open-door bedroom and closed-door bedroom side by side. That’s where the *show-and-tell* idea came from. We knew we had a great concept coupled with what Allison+Partners provided in terms of new statistics from the consumer perception study. We knew that we had to get broad-based media attention in order to really get this message out there.” The video garnered 12 million views, and the public relations team partnered with digital influencers to generate 3.2 million social media engagements for 38 million social media impressions – with an overall 1.8 billion total campaign reach.

A focus group was assembled under the guise of being questioned about fire safety. The FSRI and A+P teams then surprised them with a full-scale experiment showing what happens during an actual house fire when a bedroom door is closed versus when the door is open. The visual impact of a soot-covered bedroom when the bedroom door is left open, as compared to a nearly pristine bedroom when the door is closed, was captured on video with the onlookers’ real-time reactions. Susice summarized: “We just knew this concept was going to be a winner because we incorporated research into the content we were going to develop.” She added that in the past, public service announcements merely showed people walking through a door or past an open door. So, the new campaign would be entirely unique, showing the real-time reaction of the focus group members as a house was burned in front of them (from a safe distance), and then once the fire was put out, an outer wall was lowered revealing the dramatic difference between the open- and closed-door bedrooms.

Teamwork works when gathering and analyzing quantitative data

Susice said that measurement of the *Close Before You Doze* campaign is ongoing. “I have a saying on our team that everything we do has to do at least three things for us. We’re measuring the success of the campaign through impressions via media exposure, behavior change through an annual consumer survey, and social media monitoring to track incidents of *Close Before You Doze* saves. Between January 2020 and April 2022, we’ve tracked 71 lives saved because of people conscientiously making the move to close their doors before they go to bed.”