

Selecting audiences and behaviours

Deciding which audiences and behaviours to target with your communications strategy.

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Practice points

1. Messaging that focuses on people witnessing and experiencing sexist behaviours can be effective. However, it needs to be constructed in a way that does not appear to place an unfair burden on them (rather than those who are perceived as being at fault).
2. Messaging that targets unacceptable behaviour should be constructed in a way that does not inadvertently create a sense that such behaviour is normal.
3. It may be more impactful overall to use messaging to target what can be seen as 'everyday' sexism, rather than more serious but rarer behaviours.

Any communication strategy needs to decide how far, and in what way, to target sexist behaviours and the people instigating them directly, versus targeting people who witness or experience sexist behaviours.

Avoid stigmatising language

While it seems natural to talk about perpetrators, bystanders and victims of sexist behaviours, these terms are better avoided because they label people in a way that can be stigmatising.

It is preferable to use more neutral language, such as people instigating, witnessing or experiencing sexist behaviours.

Consider unintended consequences

It is important to consider the unintended consequences of messaging strategies in communications campaigns (Government Communication Service, 2021).

Evidence suggests that focusing on those who witness and experience sexism can be just as impactful as directly focusing on those who instigate it (Lau and others, 2023). However, this carries the risk that the organisation is seen as placing an unfair burden on the wrong people.

On the other hand, by focusing on the frequency or scale of unacceptable behaviours – as opposed to desirable and positive behaviours – campaigns run the risk of drawing attention to them, making people assume that they are more common than they are (Cialdini, Reno and Kallgren, 1990). (For example, inadvertently implying that sexism is part of what it means to work in policing.)

To avoid normalising unacceptable behaviour, the messaging could remind the audience that it is the exception and not over-emphasise the scale of the problem.

Combine values and behaviours in your messaging

In cases where the audience may find it hard to recognise the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, it can help to combine established policing values with specific behaviours in the same message. For example, not going along with a sexist remark (behaviour) is a sign of professionalism and respect (values), while supporting a colleague who has experienced sexism (behaviour) is a sign of loyalty and integrity (values).

Focus on common behaviours

Choices also need to be made about how far to target more extreme but rare behaviours versus more common but less extreme behaviours. This must be determined on a case-by-case basis. However, the medium of communication is better suited to tackling behaviours in which there is an element of education, rather than trying to coerce audiences (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004).

Helping audiences avoid common ‘everyday’ sexist behaviours may therefore achieve more traction than targeting extreme behaviours. These extreme behaviours may be better addressed using more individualised approaches and sanctions.

References

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Tags

Violence against women and girls