Targeting messaging to audiences' capabilities, opportunities and motivations

Using the COM-B model to target specific behaviours.

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Practice points

1. Use the COM-B model to gain an understanding of what features of the audience's capability, opportunity and/or motivation are most useful to target in the messaging.
2. Study your audience for specific behaviours that you are trying to prevent and behaviours that you are trying to promote.

COM-B model

Communications campaigns need to target specific drivers of the behaviours of interest in their audience to unlock the desired change.

A simple but powerful model of behaviour has been developed to help identify the drivers of behaviour. It is called the COM-B model (capability, opportunity, motivation, behaviour). (Michie, van Stralen and West, 2011; West and Michie, 2020.)

This model notes that for any behaviour to occur at any time, the person must:

- be psychologically and physically capable of doing it (including a person's understanding, confidence or skills)
- have the physical and social opportunity to do it (including time and resources, as well as social and cultural norms)
- be more motivated to do that thing at that moment than any other competing behaviour (including a person's values, intentions, desires and habits)

To unlock behaviour change, all three drivers may need to be targeted. Often, we place too much emphasis on one particular driver (for example, shaping capability via education and training), which on its own is unlikely to have the desired impact. The COM-B model also notes the

interaction between drivers – capability and opportunity both influence motivation, and motivation influences capability.

Using the COM-B model to target campaigns

Figure 1 shows how the COM-B model can be used to target campaigns based on what is preventing or driving a behaviour. Important lessons coming from the model include the following.

- When trying to promote or prevent a behaviour, it is important to find out how far the barriers or enablers to action relate to capability, opportunity or motivation, in order to target the communications campaigns effectively. All too often we make common-sense assumptions about what is getting in the way of behaviour – for example, assuming that people are failing to challenge sexism because they do not know how (capability), when a stronger barrier may be the fear of getting it wrong and the personal consequences of doing so (motivation).
- Sometimes, the best way to influence motivation is by targeting capability or opportunity – for example, by improving confidence or skills, or by shaping social norms. In general, making something easier increases motivation to do it.
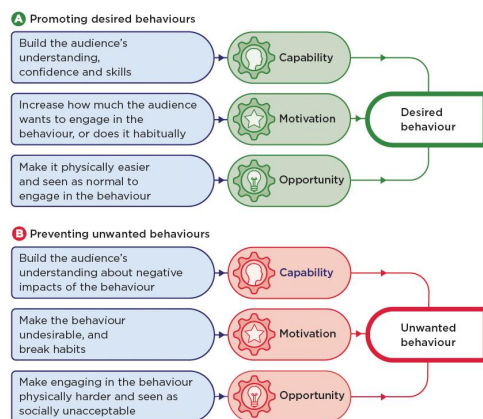

Figure 1: Using the COM-B model (capability, opportunity, motivation, behaviour) to help target communications campaigns

Behavioural diagnosis

Finding out what features of capability, opportunity and motivation to target is known as 'behavioural diagnosis'. Just as a doctor would not usually prescribe a treatment for a patient

without first diagnosing the condition, professionals seeking to address behavioural problems need to find out what underlies these before designing interventions.

The COM-B model can be used to structure audience insight research that can help determine what to focus on in the messaging.

Checklists for targeting messaging

Table 1 shows a simple checklist to help target campaigns against sexist behaviours. Table 2 shows a checklist to promote behaviours of those witnessing or experiencing sexist behaviours.

The idea is to tick the items that, following audience research, the communications team judges to be most important to target. Items may be left unticked if there is no need to target them because they are already at an acceptable level, or if it would be impracticable or not particularly effective to target them. The depth of your audience research will be dependent on resources available and may need to be done rapidly (for example, through a short survey or one-off focus group).

Table 1: Checklist for helping to target messaging to combat sexist behaviours (C = capability, O = opportunity, M = motivation)

Potential messaging that aims to prevent unacceptable behaviours
Raise awareness that the specific behaviour is unacceptable (C)
Promote understanding of the negative consequences of the behaviour (C)
Foster mental strength and confidence to resist the temptation to engage in the behaviour (C)
Enhance social skills for resisting peer pressure to engage in the behaviour (C)
Reduce the sense of normality of the behaviours (O)
Promote genuine desire not to engage in the behaviour (M)
Promote reflection about the behaviour before acting (M)
Prevent feelings of reward from the behaviour (M)

Table 2: Checklist for helping to target messaging to promote behaviours that challenge sexism (C = capability, O = opportunity, M = motivation)

Potential messaging that aims to promote desired behaviours
Raise awareness of the desired behaviour (C)
Promote understanding of the benefits of the behaviour (C)
Foster mental strength and confidence to engage in the behaviour (C)
Enhance social skills needed to engage in the behaviour (C)
Raise the sense of normality of the behaviour (O)
Maximise triggers in their environment to remind them about the behaviour (O)
Promote genuine desire to engage in the behaviour (M)
Help routinise the behaviour so that they are enacted without thinking (M)
Provide social reward for the behaviour (M)

Example

The following is an example of a COM-B diagnosis for the behaviour of witnesses challenging sexist behaviour that might result from applying the checklist in Table 2 for a given target audience.

Capability

- Is able to recognise unacceptable sexist behaviours, including those that constitute everyday sexism.
- Understands why it is important for these behaviours to be challenged.
- Understands how best to challenge sexist behaviours in difference scenarios.
- Has the confidence and skills to challenge sexist behaviours.

Motivation

- Believes that challenging sexist behaviours is the right thing to do.

- Believes that challenging sexist behaviours will be worthwhile.
- Is willing to overcome concerns about the social difficulties in challenging sexist behaviours.
- Feels a sense of satisfaction and pride in challenging sexist behaviours.

Opportunity

- Is exposed to strong social norms and expectations that they will challenge sexist behaviours.
- Is exposed to strong modelling of challenging sexist behaviours by people they identify with.
- Is exposed to frequent and salient reminders about expectation that they will challenge sexist behaviours.
- Has easy access to organisational channels for initiating proportionate responses to sexist behaviours.

A simplified behavioural diagnosis

A simplified approach to behavioural diagnosis can also be useful in some circumstances. In this approach, we see whether we can assess what proportion of the target audience falls into each of the following categories.

- Awareness raising – 'I didn't know that the behaviour is supposed to be wrong'.
- Persuasion about why it is wrong – 'I know the behaviour is supposed to be wrong but I don't think it is'.
- Persuasion about why it is important – 'I agree the behaviour is wrong but it's not that important'.
- Changing their perception of the social norms – 'I agree that the behaviour is wrong and people shouldn't do it. but everyone does it'.
- Helping them build the capability to resist the impulses to do it – 'I agree that the behaviour is wrong and I try to make sure I don't do it, but I don't always succeed'.
- Reinforcing their commitment to not doing it – 'I agree that the behaviour is wrong and I never do it'.

References

- Michie S, van Stralen MM and West R. (2011). **The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions**. Implementation Science, 6, pp 1–12. [Accessed 10 November 2023]

- West R and Michie S. (2020). **A brief introduction to the COM-B model of behaviour and the PRIME theory of motivation**. Qeios [internet]. [Accessed 10 November 2023]

Tags

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