The Hidden Killer

Objective

More people die each year in Great Britain from asbestos-related diseases than are killed in accidents on the road – in excess of 4,000. The Hidden Killer campaign is targeted at the single biggest group of those at risk, tradespeople, 20 of whom die weekly. Research shows that tradespeople are in denial about the risks they face, with many wrongly believing they won’t encounter it and that asbestos exposure is unproblematic at low levels. The objective of the Hidden Killer campaign is to raise awareness of the risks of asbestos and encourage tradesmen to take positive action to educate and protect themselves.

The campaign was first run as a pilot in early 2008, followed by three national roll outs later that year, in 2009 and in 2010.

Strategy

HSE identified a need to create a multi-channel communications campaign to raise awareness about when maintenance workers might encounter asbestos fibres and how to deal with the material safely.

The communications objectives for the campaign were:

- Raise awareness that tradesmen will come into contact with asbestos; and
- Deepen understanding about the dangers of exposure.

Creative development

Three creative ideas were developed and tested with representatives from the relevant audience groups. The concept that was most effective, positioned asbestos as the ‘hidden killer’, with creative imagery using the word ‘asbestos’ to demonstrate where the material might be found in a working environment.

The key message accompanying the images, was that asbestos is a hidden killer and can be found in any building built or refurbished before 2000; the adverts quoted the figures for the number of electricians, plumbers; joiners and general maintenance workers dying every week from asbestos-related disease.

PR strategy

HSE developed a PR strategy highlighting the issue of asbestos exposure in the national, regional and trade publications. This was achieved by releasing new official statistics, revealing for the first time the extent of asbestos-related diseases; publicising the experiences of sufferers and their grieving families to make the illnesses real for key publications; and signing up eminent and leading stakeholders to promote the campaign.
**Multi-channel campaign**

In addition to the PR strategy, HSE used an integrated multi-channel marketing campaign, which included a tradespeople-friendly microsite, ‘spot the asbestos’ web tool, Hammer Horror style online advert, a TV filler and a suite of soundbite interviews with family members as part of a national radio partnership. The PR added credibility and significant extra visibility to the campaign.

**Hard news**

To give the campaign launch a hard news edge, HSE used annually-gathered statistics to paint a picture of the true extent of asbestos related diseases – more than 35,000 cases in the last 30 years, with a projected death toll topping 150,000. This made asbestos a clear national issue. These were broken down to local authority level to ensure the story had relevance across Britain, in addition to hard hitting victims’ stories.

**Telling the victims’ stories**

Statistics alone cannot convey the real human tragedy of a life cut short by asbestos exposure. Across the three phases of the marketing campaign a total of 37 case studies were researched across England, Scotland and Wales, giving a spread across key ‘at risk’ groups, including electricians, plumbers and joiners. Some were surviving sufferers, others were widows – enabling pitches to be made to both trade and women’s media, helping provoke ‘wives and girlfriends’ to raise asbestos as a workplace risk with their partners.
Stakeholder engagement

Pulling together a partnership of more than 60 stakeholders to endorse and support the campaign proved central to generating national media interest and keeping the campaign going beyond the marketing activity. Supporters included the powerful voices of the TUC, British Lung Foundation, Local Government Association, Federation of Small Builders and others, alongside HSE. The campaign messages and materials were promoted and disseminated by trade associations and industry bodies. A special role was also created for victims groups, who were provided with a template letter to send to their local papers telling their own stories alongside key campaign messages.

Outcome, including formal media evaluation

Post campaign evaluation carried out shows the combined PR and marketing effort as a whole to be staggeringly successful, with the integrated campaign achieving:

- 85 per cent awareness in the target tradespeople audience of the campaign, peaking at 90 per cent for electricians
- 90 per cent said they had been provoked to think about their own exposure to asbestos, with 87 per cent saying they now had a better understanding of the risks
- 60 per cent said they had taken more precautions to prevent exposure to asbestos
- 47 per cent talked to a workmate about asbestos
- 28 per cent followed the call to action to visit www.hse.gov.uk/hiddenkiller. This equates to just over 27,000 unique visitors

Return on investment

The media evaluation showed that the PR activity alone delivered a return on investment of 7:1.

Next steps

HSE’s work on the Hidden Killer campaign has been ongoing throughout the three phases of the marketing campaign. HSE is working with the Government to determine what we can now do to build upon the previous marketing work. With deaths from asbestos-related diseases predicted to continue rising in the coming years, HSE is hoping to use the success of the work done so far and to further focus on driving action and behaviour change with target tradespeople who are exposed to asbestos through their work.