



AMEC International Communication Effectiveness Awards 2015 Entry Form Template – PR Consultancies/In-House Teams

(Maximum 4 sides A4)

For full details on how and where to send your entries for the awards go to the page [5 steps to submitting an entry](#) at www.amecawards.com

Category: Best campaign in the public sector

Entering Company Name: Department of Health, Department for International Development, Cabinet Office, NHS England and Public Health England

Campaign title: Ebola – communicating the risk and preparing the response

The entry must include the following in a maximum of 4 sides A4. (Minimum font size – 10)

Objective/Brief

Brief

From small beginnings in rural Guinea, Ebola became the defining health story of 2014. Over twelve months, it claimed over 9,000 lives, crippled the health systems of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia, and triggered a global public health response of a scale not seen since the HIV/Aids epidemic.

The UK was significantly affected by too. Hundreds of UK military and clinical personnel travelled to Sierra Leone to support global response. In August 2014, we experienced our first case of Ebola, when the nurse Will Pooley was repatriated and successfully treated, and, four months later, the first Ebola case was diagnosed on UK soil when Pauline Cafferkey tested positive. Both were admitted and successfully treated at the Royal Free Hospital in London.

These developments posed the challenge of maintaining reputation and public confidence in the Government's response to the crisis, as unfolding events in the US and Spain over the autumn showed the potential for controversial and alarm around levels of readiness and the handling of suspected cases.

Communications needed to educate and reassure the public about the low risk of transmission, to inform NHS staff about what they need to know and do in the event of any case, and to build popular support for the UK's contribution to global efforts to tackle Ebola in West Africa. This needed to be done at scale (involving multiple partners across the public sector) and pace (given that experts had predicted a 'handful of UK cases' by the end of 2014).

Top line objectives were therefore established to guide a joined-up communications response with specific targets around reducing levels of public anxiety, building the knowledge and confidence of NHS staff in the local plans and protocols in place to deal with any suspected case, and increasing both public and staff support for the overall approach taken by the UK governments and its agencies in protecting the UK.

Strategy and tactics

The communications strategy had three elements:

- **An integrated public information campaign** explaining the facts about Ebola, how it spreads, and how difficult it is to catch;
- **A workforce communications plan** giving NHS staff and other public officials key operational information and reassuring them about the robustness of local plans;
- **A major digital and media PR push** to explain the scale and range of measures in place to protect the UK and minimise public concern.



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These broke down into a range of tactics, each targeting key audience groups and using tried and tested channels for reach them. This included:

- **A ‘white coat’ media strategy** featuring influential clinical voices to use as key spokespeople before, during and after the first case. This was backed by extensive media and stakeholder briefings keeping the key commentators informed and involved as the UK response took shape. Stakeholder mapping meanwhile helped identify the most influential figures to target.
- **Tailored guidance for professional groups** ranging from GPs through to police, border agency officials, and care professional available on dedicated Ebola pages on Gov.uk. This was promoted through trade media coverage, internal NHS communications channels, and via professional organisations as outlined above;
- **Speedy, 48-hour turnaround on design, production and distribution** of information leaflets and posters for hospitals, GP surgeries and pharmacies, which targeted key staff and public audiences – all major content was assessed and amended in light of focus group feedback;
- **Up-to-the-minute Ebola content on NHS Choices and GOV.UK**, which were positioned as the main digital channels for public and staff information respectively – the former was known to be key for reaching out to the 50+ age group, which focus groups showed were actively seeking Ebola content;
- **High impact digital content**, including a ‘Medics Behind the Mask’ social media campaign to build awareness of and support for clinical support provided by UK volunteers in Sierra Leone; video and audio content by key spokespeople, as well as clear, concise infographics on risk and NHS readiness, designed to appeal to a younger demographic via social media.

Execution/Implementation

- **An integrated communications team** was formed, comprising the Department of Health, Public Health England, NHS England, and the Royal Free Hospital working with devolved administrations and other government departments.
- A **‘first case’ handling plan** helped co-ordinate the response across all parties, including reassuring holding lines for social media and template statements for local trusts and national bodies to be issued in the event of a case.
- **Monthly focus group sessions** on Ebola were held, including the public and a wide range of NHS professionals, which provided a running commentary on the impact of our communications.
- **A full evaluation plan** was developed and a **weekly report** produced and shared with partners drawing together media analysis, traffic to websites and qualitative insights from social media.



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Campaign Effectiveness

Output measures

Media

- Targeted press briefings and a drum-beat of reassurance messages ensured that **approximately three-quarters (70%) of media coverage about Ebola was positive or reassuring** in the three months ahead of the Cafferkey case.
- In the week after Pauline Cafferkey was admitted, 78% of all media coverage was positive or straight in tone, whilst **76% of all third party commentary** on the handling of the case was supportive, again indicating a measured and proportionate media and stakeholder response.

Digital and social media

- There were **two million unique views** of Ebola content on NHS Choices in the run-up to the first case, whilst sharing of Ebola infographics by key stakeholders and other partners achieved over **five million impressions**.
- There was an **overwhelmingly positive reaction to Medics Behind the Mask campaign**, including 10 million impressions online for [#MedicsBehindTheMask](#) and over 350,000 people reached with one [Facebook post alone](#).
- **Qualitative analysis of social media** found a shift away from alarmist content on the risk to UK in early October to more informed, factual content on the international effort from November. Analysis of traffic to NHS Choices pages also revealed significant drop off in Ebola-related searches after the public reassurance campaign began in October.

Stakeholder relations

- **A broad weekly Ebola stakeholder communications forum kept group meetings** kept communications partners informed and engaged and were well-received, with a poll of members finding universal support for the way Government and partners worked with them on Ebola.

Outcome measures

Public polling

- Over three months up to Christmas, there was a **19% point decrease** in the proportion believing Ebola was a significant or moderate threat to the UK. Whilst the Cafferkey case triggered an immediate rise of 8% within 24 hours, this quickly fell back to pre-announcement levels, and within a month only 6% described Ebola as a 'significant' threat.
- There was also a **consistent majority support for UK plans** in the run up to the Cafferkey case and this measure rose slightly after Christmas, particularly after Cafferkey's successful treatment at the Royal Free Hospital.
- A similar proportion of the public supported the UK's international efforts, with DfID's **Medics Behind the Mask campaign** generating a 5% point rise in the proportion of people believing the Government was doing enough to support international efforts to tackle Ebola (according to polling between 18-25 November 2014).



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NHS staff polling

- Findings of NHS staff survey, conducted in February 2015 by GfK, found:
 - **Near universal (90+%) level of high/medium knowledge** among key clinical staff about how to reassure public, identify a potential Ebola case and what to do in response.
 - **High levels of confidence across the workforce at large**, with 80% of all NHS staff feeling confident that the local system would be able to respond quickly and effectively to a suspected case.
 - **Moderately high NHS confidence (72%) in the national policies** in place to protect the UK from Ebola.
- Results are now being used to focus ongoing communications on professional groups with slightly lower levels of knowledge and confidence, to be tested with second wave polling planned for summer 2015.

Conclusion

This was a programme built and run on evidence and evaluation throughout – from extensive focus group testing at the start, through to regular tracking of public opinion over the course of the campaign, through to set piece staff research at the end of the initial phase of activity.

Two final indicators really mark out the impact that communications has made. The first is **the comparison with the US experience**, where the first Ebola case triggered a significant and sustained rise in concern¹ and a 23 percentage point drop in support for the Centre for Disease Control². By contrast, the NHS has enhanced its reputation as a global beacon for infectious disease management.

The second is the fact that **more than 170 people have now been tested for Ebola in the UK**. Each had the potential to create significant public alarm if mishandled, and the fact that none of them did shows the grip and awareness of internal processes, the quality of relationships built up between partners, and the measured and responsible tone of media environment we have shaped.

There can be no room for complacency whilst the Ebola outbreak continues to rage in West Africa. Yet whilst some indicators suggest further work to do in the weeks ahead, the consistency and rigour of the communications has undoubtedly supported the success of the UK's response in a significant and quantifiable way.

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<http://www.harrisinteractive.com/NewsRoom/HarrisPolls/tabid/447/mid/1508/articleId/1507/ctl/ReadCustom%20Default/Default.aspx>

² <http://www.gallup.com/poll/179522/americans-ratings-cdc-down-ebola-crisis.aspx>