

AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN **PUBLIC RELATIONS** **2021**



Best Internal Communication



An Garda Síochána manning a checkpoint during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Campaign

Keeping Our People Safe from COVID-19

Description of Campaign

This campaign strove to protect the employees of An Garda Síochána from COVID-19. To minimise the number of employees off sick or self-isolating, we dispelled confusion over how to stay safe. This ultimately ensured the organisation could continue to provide its essential service to the Irish public.



Organisation

An Garda Síochána

Background to the Campaign

An Garda Síochána is the national police service of the Republic of Ireland with a workforce of approximately 18,000 personnel. Our overriding mission is Keeping People Safe, and this underpins everything we do.

An Garda Síochána has long-standing and well-documented issues with internal communication, as highlighted by both the Cultural Audit and the Commission on the Future of Policing reports in 2018. As a result, the first Office of Internal Communications was established in May 2019.

We conducted extensive internal research to unearth the key issues with internal communication. These played a significant part in shaping and planning this campaign. They can be summarised as follows:

- Personnel are suffering from email and information overload, with a high volume of emails received daily from different areas of the organisation.
- Written communications are difficult to read or understand quickly.

- There is a hierarchical culture based on a military model in which communications are traditionally cascaded down through policing ranks. This is ineffective and slow.
- Gardaí are largely non-wired during the course of their working day making them hard to reach with messages.
- Personnel are time-poor; they do not have time to read lengthy emails or long attachments.
- Communications are dry and dull.

The Office of Internal Communications developed a 3-year strategy to tackle these issues. Implementation of this strategy was just commencing when COVID-19 arrived in Ireland.

In March 2020, An Garda Síochána was called upon to play a crucial frontline role in the national response to COVID-19. This raised a number of new and confusing issues in the organisation, for example:

- How can frontline Gardaí protect themselves from the virus when they are in daily contact with members of the public?
- How can cramped Garda stations become safe working environments for personnel?
- How can checkpoints be manned safely when they require close conversation with motorists?
- How can social distancing be applied to the daily realities of operational policing?

Statement of Objectives

With the onset of COVID-19, there was a lot of confusion about how to stay safe from this new virus. This confusion stemmed from a lack of internal coordination on sharing information, as well as rapidly changing public health advice.

We felt this confusion was one of the main barriers to COVID-19 safety at work in An Garda Síochána. We ran this communications campaign to remove this confusion through clear, simple and impactful communications.

We knew from police services in other countries that COVID-19 had the potential to diminish our ability to deliver a policing service through high levels of employee absence.

Our overall goal with this campaign was therefore to keep our personnel safe from COVID-19. This would enable the organisation to respond effectively to the pandemic, delivering on its mission of Keeping People Safe. This goal is therefore aligned with the overall objectives of the organisation.

Our goal is **SMART**:

S	Specific	A specific, laser focus on safety and protection from COVID-19
M	Measureable	Quantitative data available from HR and from the email newsletter
A	Achievable	Keep the campaign simple to run it successfully in a small team
R	Realistic	Removing confusion should realistically help keep employees safe
T	Timely	Begin in March 2020 and end when the pandemic is over

We planned to deliver a creative, engaging communications campaign to encourage positive behaviour change amongst employees. Behaviours such as social distancing and wearing face coverings were new behaviours that did not come naturally to employees.

We had a number of objectives in this campaign which fed upwards into our overall outcome level goal:

- Create a 'single source of truth' on which personnel can rely for trusted COVID-19 information, to reduce confusion.
- Create a mechanism to communicate directly with all personnel, stepping outside the traditional rank cascade.
- Create an effective way to reach non-wired frontline Gardaí.
- Adopt a creative and innovative approach to capture people's attention.
- Communicate key messages in bite-sized chunks that can be digested quickly and easily.

Programme Planning and Strategy

Previous crisis internal communications within An Garda Síochána were ad hoc and based on a high volume of lengthy

emails. The language previously used was heavily jargonised and hard to understand.

We would take a different, creative approach.

This campaign began in late March 2020 and is still ongoing. The intensity and frequency of the campaign peaks and wanes in line with national transmission rates. This campaign was delivered daily in waves 1, 2 and 3 and was scaled back to weekly in between.

We delivered this campaign across multiple channels to meet the needs of our employees. This campaign set out to influence all employees in An Garda Síochána, but we profiled two broad audiences in the organisation: those who work in operational policing and those who don't.

Operational policing employees were profiled as follows:

- Time-poor; no appetite for lengthy written communications.
- Non-wired for most of the day.
- High exposure to COVID-19 risks due to the nature of their job.
- Spend a lot of time in patrol cars.
- Receive a daily face-to-face briefing from their Sergeant at the start of each shift.
- Time spent in Garda stations is at shared workspaces or in canteens.

And non-operational employees were profiled as follows:

- Wired during the course of their working day, with easy access to email.
- Time-poor with no appetite for lengthy written communications.
- Exposure to COVID-19 risks in cramped shared offices with limited ability to socially distance.
- Some are working remotely but still visit the office frequently to sign documents.
- Ad hoc, inconsistent approach to manager/ team meetings.

To reach both audiences effectively, we planned to use a range of channels to deliver communications to meet people where they are, in ways that suited them best. Messages would include safety protocols for both operational policing scenarios as well as office-based scenarios. We put a blanket ban on any lengthy written communications, instead focusing on short, bite-sized chunks of information in a relaxed, conversational tone of voice. Finally, we wanted to push the boundaries a bit and use a creative, humorous approach which we knew would be a break from the norm in such a traditional organisation.

We conducted research with a range of stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the confusion that was hampering adherence to safety measures. This involved consulting with key stakeholders including the Chief Medical Officer, the COVID-19 Coordination Unit, the Health & Safety team and a range of senior leaders. We also consulted widely with personnel across the country by harnessing the Communications Council (a group of mixed ranks and grades representing different regions of Ireland). Each member of the Council gathered local feedback on what employees were confused about and what specific behaviours need improving. This research revealed that employees:

- Were likely to be complacent on social distancing while on their breaks in the canteen or shared kitchen.
- Were accustomed to spending lots of time in close contact with members of the public (and each other).
- Were confused about much of the official guidance on COVID-19 as there was just too much information and they didn't know what was important.

We used these valuable insights to contribute to content development.

We launched a new digital communications tool for this campaign; an email newsletter. Prior to the pandemic, we hosted workshops with a variety of employees to develop a new internal newsletter and procured the services of Poppulo, a digital newsletter supplier. We were just about to launch this new tool when COVID-19 hit, so we were able instead launch a COVID-19 specific newsletter in late March 2020.

This newsletter quickly became the organisation's "single source of truth" during the pandemic (and remains so, almost a year later). It reduced email volume by collating information from various departments into one single email.

It reduced information overload by only including relevant and important information. We introduced a strict 200-word limit on articles to keep them short and to the point. We used an informal, relaxed tone of voice with very clear, simple language to make the information digestible. We used catchy headlines and images to make the newsletter easy to skim for employees short on time. We also disregarded the traditional rank cascade of information by circulating the newsletter directly to all personnel. It reduced confusion by simplifying complex messages.

We used a number of tactics to deliver our campaign, as follows:

Safety protocols and instructions

We shared videos, instructions, protocols and checklists on how to stay safe in work. This including protocols for manning checkpoints, dealing with prisoners, checklists for self-isolation procedures and instructions on sharing work spaces in the offices.

Making our Chief Medical Officer visible

We created a series of videos with our Chief Medical Officer, where he explained the latest medical and safety advice in a conversational way. We also ran “Ask Me Anything” sessions with him through the newsletter.

Peer-to-peer knowledge transfer

We facilitated employees sharing knowledge laterally, through images and stories of tactics used across the country to stay safe in work. This included photographs of employees taping off canteens or desks to ensure distancing, and a video of a Sergeant explaining how to hold face-to-face meetings safely.

Making social distancing less abstract

We created bespoke infographics to help employees visualise what a 2 metre distance looks like using Garda-specific items, for example two Garda dogs or one Garda horse. We shared humorous photos of employees illustrating a 2 metre distance using police tape or patrol cars.

Storytelling

We told emotive, engaging stories to bring home the dangers of COVID-19 and the importance of safety measures. We told the story of a young, healthy Garda who was hospitalised with COVID-19 to show the virus is dangerous to everyone, both young and old.

Reimagining dull handwashing messaging

We got imaginative when it came to messaging around handwashing, creating messages on the history of handwashing and the science behind how soap works. We used an image of soap as a hero using the Fight Club movie concept in our latest round of posters, with the tagline “The first rule of COVID-19 is to keep your hands clean”.

Prompting good behaviours in complacency zones

We printed tent cards to sit on canteen and kitchen tables in Garda stations, areas where we knew employees were most likely to become complacent. We used humorous, light-hearted taglines like “Don’t risk it for a biscuit” and “COVID-19 is nobody’s cup of tea”.

Reaching Gardaí with face-to-face communication

We engaged with Sergeants (the supervisors of frontline Gardaí) to help them with face-to-face communication. Sergeants used a print version of the newsletter for their pre-tour briefings at the start of each shift, making it easier to reach our non-wired workforce.

Creating colourful signage for Garda stations

Taking inspiration from the florescent yellow on patrol cars, we printed colourful safety signage for Garda stations, including posters, floor decals and stickers to prompt positive behaviour change. One set of posters, using famous crime fighting partnerships, was featured in a national newspaper for its creativity.

Targeted print content based on employee feedback

Feedback from employees told us that poor ventilation, poor cleaning practices and not wearing face coverings in patrol cars were ongoing issues. We printed window stickers reminding people to open the windows, desk stickers reminding people to clean workstations, and air fresheners for patrol cars reminding employees to wear a face covering.

Screensavers on all desktop computers

We created screensavers to display key messages on safety behaviours. These screensavers appear on all desktops and laptops across the organisation and serve as an eye-catching daily reminder for personnel.

Samples of content are included in the accompanying PDF document.

Our use of humour, creativity and bright colours to get the message across was something quite new and innovative for internal communication in An Garda Síochána.

Measurement

At the start of the campaign in March 2020, we did not have an outcome-level KPI in place. Organisational resilience was steady during waves 1 and 2, and during this time we measured outputs only.

However, as wave 3 progressed we noticed a correlation between the intensity of our communication efforts and a reduction in the number of employees sick or self-isolating due to COVID-19. So we developed a new KPI: the percentage of employees available for work, calculated using HR data on employee absences.

The critical role we played in keeping our employees safe from COVID-19 has been explicitly recognised by senior Garda management on multiple occasions. One Superintendent explained the impact of our work by stating *“the fog of confusion has lifted”*.

We also measured the specific impact on employees adhering to specific behaviours, such as wearing face coverings, using data available from spot checks done at Garda Stations.

Newsletter metrics

We obtained benchmark data from Poppulo to assess our newsletter reach. Here are the average open rates from:

- All of their clients: 58%
- Our industry peers (public sector clients): 50%
- An Garda Síochána: 67%

This demonstrates an effective reach, far ahead of our peers. Our average readership figure each day is more than 12,000 employees.

To ensure we could be confident people were reading the content, we measured reading times. Employees spent an average of 2.5 minutes reading the email, so we knew they weren't just opening and closing it.

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