



AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN **PUBLIC RELATIONS 2022**

Best Healthcare Campaign



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Campaign

Community Immunity: Supporting COVID-19 vaccinations in Irish pharmacies

Description of Campaign

Throughout 2021 a comprehensive media relations campaign was delivered by the Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) and MKC Communications. This aimed to maximise the positive impact of Ireland's community pharmacies in the COVID-19 vaccination campaign. The outcome was 796,719 COVID vaccines being administered in Irish pharmacies.



Public Relations Consultant

MKC Communications



Client

Irish Pharmacy Union

Background to the Campaign

The Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) is the representative and professional body for over 2,300 community pharmacists in Ireland. The IPU exists to advocate, advance and protect the role of the pharmacist at the centre of primary healthcare.

Towards the end of 2020, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic was focussed on the rollout of a national COVID-19 vaccination campaign. In the words of the health experts getting vaccines 'into arms' as quickly as possible became the national priority.

There was a clear need to prioritise healthcare workers and nursing home residents. However, the IPU recognised that when vaccines became available to the wider population it was essential they were available within community pharmacies.

Pharmacists are trained, experienced vaccinators and it was clear that community pharmacies should play a significant role in support of the vaccination campaign. Pharmacists have a ten-year track record of providing a safe, effective

and convenient flu vaccination service. Research has shown that the overall uptake of flu vaccinations has increased significantly in Ireland since pharmacy vaccinations began.

With the full reopening of Irish society dependent on the pace of the vaccine roll-out utilising the capacity of pharmacies would significantly increase that pace. Most importantly maximising the role of pharmacies help to protect the health of thousands of people in Ireland.

With limited supplies and complex storage requirements, the health authorities initially favoured mass vaccination centres. The IPU identified that this option was not suitable for everyone and that pharmacies were essential to maximise the uptake of vaccines.

The Irish Pharmacy Union, with the support of MKC Communications, developed and executed a media relations campaign with the sole goal of ensuring pharmacies were enlisted to vaccinate the moment supply concerns abated.

A second phase was also required to maximise awareness of pharmacy vaccinations so that the full capacity of Ireland's pharmacies was used, once again from day one, of their availability.

Statement of Objectives

The objectives of this campaign were exclusively focused on vaccinating as many people as possible as quickly as possible. These were defined as:

1. Ensure Ireland's community pharmacies were enlisted in the national Covid-19 vaccination campaign as early as practicable i.e. Once supply constraints were not in play.
2. Use media relations to raise awareness of the availability of vaccines in pharmacies in order to maximise uptake of vaccines in pharmacies.
3. Use media relations to encourage cohorts of the population who had not availed vaccines in vaccine centres to avail of pharmacy vaccinations.

Programme Planning and Strategy

The objectives were identified by the IPU in late 2020 as the national COVID-19 vaccine rollout began to take shape.

The IPU recognised that the supply of vaccines, the need to prioritise the most vulnerable and uncertainty about storage requirement all meant that pharmacies may not be a suitable location in the very first months of the vaccine rollout.

However, based on pharmacies' experience in annual seasonal flu vaccinations, enlisting the profession early would increase the overall number of people coming forward for vaccination.

Working with MKC Communications a two-phase media relations strategy was devised in December 2020 to commence in January 2021 after the commencement of the vaccine rollout.

The phases were defined as follows:

Phase 1: Maximise understanding of the role pharmacies could play in COVID-19 vaccinations

Phase 2: Maximise awareness of the role pharmacies are playing in COVID-19 vaccinations

Phase 1

Phase 1 of the media relations campaign was designed to deliver the IPU's 1st objective, ensuring pharmacies commenced COVID-19 vaccinations as early as practicable.

The primary audience for this phase was health authorities.

The strategy was to utilise widespread national media coverage to ensure all stakeholders in the vaccination

campaign would recognise the potential of the pharmacy sector. Through this the IPU and MKC believed, pharmacies would be enlisted as soon as practical rather than continuing to rely solely on vaccine centres. Key messages were developed focussing on the benefits to vaccine recipients:

- Pharmacies have the capacity to administer over 10,000 vaccines a day.
- Pharmacies have over a decade's experience in providing vaccinations.
- Pharmacies provide a convenient option open weekends, evenings and early months.
- Pharmacies can provide vaccination in the community, eliminating long journeys to vaccine centres.
- People trust their local pharmacist who will be able to people's minds at ease.

It was decided that the IPU needed to maintain a constant media presence. MKC recommended a cadence of one significant media outing on vaccination per fortnight. This ensured pharmacies were always part of the 'ramping up the roll out' conversation.

The key deployed by MKC was regular press releases followed by direct media relations to secure broadcast interviews.

The biggest challenge was delivering a consistent message while keeping the IPU's approach fresh for media. MKC recommended a diverse set of angles to deliver consistent media coverage from IPU press releases.

Three days after widespread media coverage was delivered for the IPU's call for pharmacies to administer Janssen vaccines the HSE announced that pharmacies could commence vaccinations and Phase 2 was launched.

Phase 2

The objective of the second phase of this campaign was simple, to vaccinate as many people as possible as quickly as possible. The IPU also wanted to provide comfort to vaccine hesitant people, in particular those who may have declined the opportunity to avail of a vaccine at a centre.

The foundations for phase 2 of this campaign were strategically laid during phase 1 with key messages that highlighted the benefits of pharmacy vaccinations to patients namely convenience, accessibility and trust in the sector. The key messaging for phase 2 only required a minor adjustment from phase 1, specifically adding in logistic information on what vaccines were available in pharmacies and to what demographics.

The audience for phase 2 was identified as all demographics who could avail of vaccines in pharmacies.

1. 18-34-year-olds.
2. Those over the age of 50 who were not previously vaccinated.

While the entire campaign was communicated through a broad range of national media specific tactics were deployed to target these distinct groups. These relied upon relationships established during the extensive outreach undertaken for phase 1.

For the younger age group Virgin Media News journalists Richard Chambers and Zara King were identified as top targets due to their strong social media following. Throughout phase 1 an open dialogue existed with both journalists with MKC pitching the concept of live broadcasts from pharmacies on 'day one' of pharmacy vaccinations.

The IPU identified a number of potential pharmacy locations and ultimately VMTV News broadcast from two, one the day pharmacy vaccinations were announced, and then on day one of the campaign. This tactic was also successfully deployed through RTÉ TV news.

While recognising that national print, radio and regional radio are all less likely to be consumed by the younger age cohort MKC still targeted and secured high levels of coverage in all media. The strategy for doing so was to invoke 'pester power' of parents encouraging adult children to attend a pharmacy for vaccination.

For the second cohort, MKC recommend a local media drive, using local pharmacies on local radio and in print. By doing so it was hoped that those over 50 who had not yet come forward for vaccinations would be encouraged by familiar accents, or a friendly voice, to register in their own local pharmacy.

To achieve this a regionalised press release was developed and issued. Figures were provided to media in each county with the numbers of participating pharmacies in their county and a list of their locations.

Regular media updates were issued throughout the summer highlighting the numbers of people who had been vaccinated in pharmacies. These received widespread coverage and acted as a reminder to any who had not registered to do so.

Measurement

Evaluation of this media relations campaign was conducted using the Barcelona Principles, with a specific focus on principle 3 relating to the positive impact on society.

Independent analysis conducted by Truehawk assessed the overall reach of each phase of the campaign. MKC analysed how media coverage contributed to the campaign's primary vaccination objectives.

Phase 1

During phase 1 of this media relations campaign the IPU secured:

- 373 pieces of unique print & online coverage.
- 95% of media was classified as the positive sentiment with 0% negative sentiment.
- IPU key messages were present in 82% of all media coverage.

This coverage was deemed to have had the following societal impact:

- The same question was put to government over 70 times in the Oireachtas in debates and parliamentary Questions.
- This pressure ensured that pharmacy vaccinations were inevitable when Ireland had a sufficient supply with pharmacy vaccinations starting for young people on July 2.

Phase 2

Phase 2 aimed to maximise the number of people vaccinated in Irish pharmacies, particularly targeting 18-34-year-olds and vaccine-hesitant people.

- In July alone the IPU secured 356 pieces of online and print coverage.
- A large number of TV and radio interviews were conducted on national and regional media.
- Pharmacies reported to the IPU being inundated with requests for vaccinations.
- The success of phase two however should be measured by the uptake of vaccines in Irish pharmacies.
- 796,719 vaccinations were administered in community pharmacies in Ireland.
- This included over 233,361 to the audience of over 50's.
- Of this 108,000 were administered prior to the booster campaign to individuals who would have qualified for vaccination in vaccine centre's but choose not to do so.
- 322,330 vaccines were administered to people under 30.
- Of this 197,000 vaccines were administered prior to the booster campaign.

The ultimate success of this media relations campaign should be judged by the fact that the high level of pharmacy vaccinations undoubtedly saved lives

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