

What elements improve the perceived communication effectiveness of cessation messages?

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Background

Achieving New Zealand's Smokefree 2025 goal requires a substantial increase in quit attempts and cessation;¹ well-designed mass-media campaigns promote these outcomes.² This qualitative study explored smokers' reactions to previous cessation campaigns, to discover which messages resonated with them, and what communication strategies might best engage smokers' attention to encourage and support cessation.

Method | Exploratory in-depth interviews

- We interviewed 47 current smokers and recent quitters for a larger study investigating cessation messaging. Participants represented four priority population groups -- Māori, Pasifika, pregnant women, and young adults -- from around New Zealand (see Table 1).
- The interview protocol contained several sections. In the third section, all participants reviewed nine images from assorted historic print and television campaigns before discussing how they perceived and understood the messages, and felt they would respond to them (see Figure 1).
- The interviews were audio recorded and the transcripts were analysed thematically.³

Figure 1 | Message set



Table 1 | Participant profile

Gender	
Female	29
Male	18
Age	
Range	17–51 yrs
Average	28 yrs
Smoking status	
Daily	35
Intermittent	8
Recently quit	4
Ethnicity (multiple responses)	
Māori	20
Pasifika	13
NZE	17
Other	4
Pregnancy status	
Pregnant	11
Recent birth	2
Location	
Auckland	12
Whanganui	15
Palmerston North	3
Wellington	10
Dunedin	7

Results | Qualitative message evaluation

In line with national survey results, many participants regretted smoking and intended to quit at some point in the future.⁴ Most believed that cessation advertising could help them on their journey to becoming smoke-free, as long as it respected their right to choose when to quit.

Three key themes emerged in participants' comments about mass-media cessation advertising communication effectiveness:

- **Portraying smokers' authentic reality** – Participants engaged with messages they thought accurately reflected their experiences and contexts, recognised their autonomy, and that were told by 'real people' (like the Quit Diaries (5)). They disliked messages they thought portrayed non-smokers' beliefs or fears (a problem with some SNOF (6) and medical ads) or had a moralistic tone.
- **The good, the bad and the ugly** – Both positive and negative messages can work. Negative messages were perceived as the norm, yet smokers want more positive smokefree outcomes. For example, many respondents liked the Quit Diaries (5) because these highlighted quitting benefits (as did the FTF cinema poster (1)). However, Adrian's true story (8) also connected despite being a hard-hitting, health message.
- **Clarity through direct appeals and imagery** – Participants thought direct messages and images were easier to process than more abstract appeals (i.e. Adrian's disease (9) was accessible, the 'tarred lung' (8) was not). Images that required effort to interpret or were too generic did not capture attention (e.g. the 'Pohutakawa lungs' in WSFD poster (3); the smiling women in 4). Images using hyperbole were dismissed as exaggerating risks by some, though not all (e.g. crayon cigarette in 7). Overall, effective imagery conveyed a key message instantly and reached even those who did not want to process the message.

Conclusions

By confronting smokers and challenging them to quit, cessation advertising may arouse dissonance, leading smokers to look for reasons to disengage with or reject messages.

- **Attributes of effective approaches:** credible, relevant, direct, meaningful imagery, respects autonomy.
- **Attributes of less effective approaches:** moralistic, didactic, strong reliance on text, and unclear imagery.

References

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