

What we are selling? – The knowledge to save your life. A public education strategy for rip currents

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Ninety-four people drowned around the coastline of Australia in the 2008–09 season. Surf lifesavers and lifeguards conducted 13,600 rescues, stopped 446,900 people getting into trouble before they needed rescuing and provided first aid for 27,100 others (1).

Currently the safer place to swim is between the red and yellow flags (2), hence Surf Life Saving Australia's (SLSA) core message 'Swim between the Red and Yellow Flags'. This message has strong recall among the Australian population with 96% of beachgoers indicating that they know that swimming between the flags is important (3). It is also noted that 42% of beachgoers admitted to swimming outside the flags in 2007, a rise from 35 per cent in 2004 (4).

Swimming and wading is the highest reported drowning activity within SLSAs drowning data. An overwhelming majority of the rescue and preventative actions arise from swimming at ocean beaches with up to 89% occurring in rips (4). Given that only 4% of Australian beaches are patrolled by lifeguard and lifesaving services (5), many Australians and overseas visitors will visit and swim at unpatrolled beaches, thus requiring a key priority for any public safety strategy to be focused on rip awareness and education.

The complicated nature of rips such as the diversity of appearance, current direction and speed along with differing ocean conditions may explain why public safety messages are complex to develop and that people continue to drown because of lack of knowledge of rips. Much has been written about the nature of rip currents and the technical aspects of such currents however little research has been conducted into the social science and human behaviour when interacting with rips.

SLSA has spent the last 24 months working within a marketing and social science context to develop its latest strategy to educate all Australian about rips. The challenge in developing a campaign around this complex topic has required defining the degree of difficulty in communicating the different aspects of rip currents to the public, testing of appropriate messages and targeting various touch points in the communication process to the public.

This presentation will present the findings of this work, the messages chosen, the communications strategy and the resources developed as part of this nation-wide campaign. It will also discuss the difficulties faced by practitioners, marketers and researchers in the process of attempting to establish the most appropriate advice for rip current survival and the strategy dilemma in trying to find one key message which may have the greatest good for the greatest number.

References

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