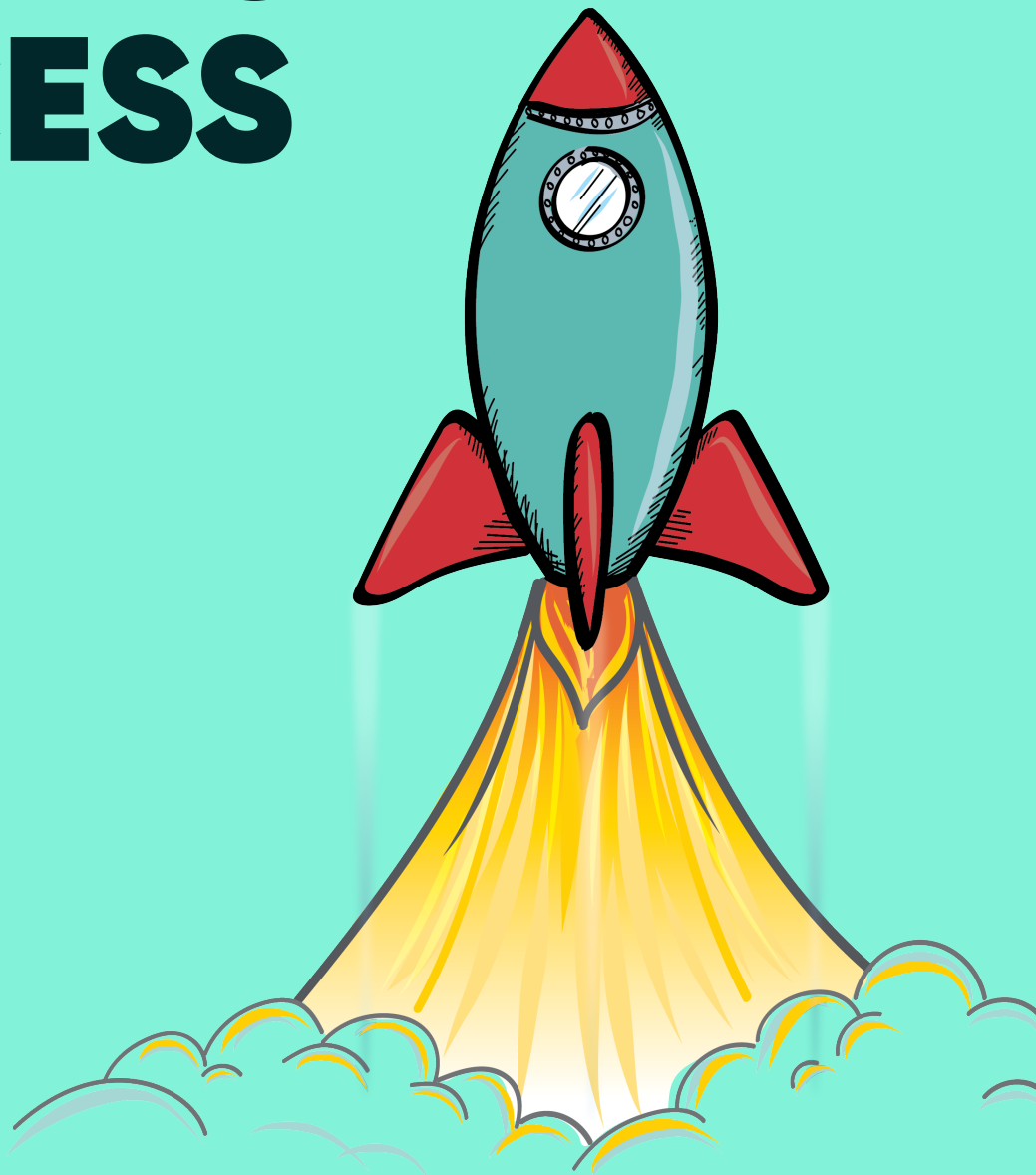




# THE PSA PLAYBOOK: **A NONPROFIT'S GUIDE TO SUCCESS**





# WHAT ARE PSAS? AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

**More than likely, you already know the answer.** We've all seen them: short, awareness-raising spots that highlight a public good. They look and sound like ads, but instead of selling a product, they're designed to promote a social cause or change behavior.

But what most marketers don't realize is that with the right messaging and creative, the potential upside is so much greater than conventional advertising. People generally have a positive impression of Public Service Announcements (PSAs). And they can be instantly recognizable memories in our cultural DNA. For those born in the 70's Smokey the Bear was part of everyone's childhood.

If you work with a 501(C)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit organization, social cause, or government program that serves the public interest, PSAs are one of the most powerful and cost-effective marketing assets in your toolkit. They raise awareness, drive action, and promote behavior change across TV, radio, print, outdoor, and digital platforms.

We've put together this guide, loaded with decades of insights, to help you navigate the complexities and understand exactly how PSAs can propel your organization.

# THE UNIQUE ADVANTAGES OF PSAS

## 1. More cost-effective than paid media

PSAs leverage donated airtime and space, making them a budget-friendly way to connect with millions. And more room in the budget means more effort can be made in the creative development, production, media outreach, distribution, and tracking and monitoring.



## 2. Won't wear out your audience

PSAs offer a direct way to engage audiences without constant fundraising "asks," protecting your brand from "giving" fatigue. Emotionally impactful content will inspire donations organically.



## 3. Expands your network

PSA campaigns help build and strengthen relationships with national and local media outlets, increasing visibility and potential interview opportunities for nonprofit leaders.

## 4. Establishes your organization as the authority

By maintaining a presence in PSA rotations, nonprofits reinforce their authority and expertise on key issues. Without a PSA, another organization may take that space.



## 5. Your stakeholders will thank you

Board members, fundraisers, and community leaders can use PSAs as a tool to spread awareness and support outreach efforts across multiple channels.



## 6. It's the ultimate assist

PSAs complement other paid, earned and owned media efforts by extending reach at no additional cost. PSAs maximize exposure and enhance overall media impact.

## 7. You can punch above your weight

90% of stations are not more likely to run a PSA from a well-known nonprofit versus a smaller lesser-known organization. As long as your website can build your credibility, you will be evaluated the same.



# ...BUT THERE ARE ALSO SOME CONSIDERATIONS.

## 1. Limited tracking for donations

Although PSAs can include trackable URLs, hashtags, and specific calls to action, direct donation attribution remains difficult.



## 2. Unpredictable airtime

PSAs are aired based on available inventory. You'll receive post-airing reports, but you won't be able to control timing or frequency.

## 3. Some blind spots

While you can select the Designated Market Area (DMA), PSAs do not guarantee audience targeting, measurable gross rating points (GRPs), or preferred placement.



## There are two challenges you need to manage.

### 1. Balance paid media with PSAs

As nonprofits invest more in paid advertising, stations are recognizing potential revenue loss. If you buy paid media, keep sales and PSA directors separate. Networks may block PSAs if you run national ads, while local stations might be more flexible. Also, ensure your paid ads differ from your PSA campaign.



### 2. Do your research

With over 1,000 PSAs airing on TV stations each month across the country, PSA Directors receive dozens of PSAs a week and they can only run a quarter of those requests. Many stations, especially national networks, choose a PSA topic that they want to focus on each year. Find out if they have selected a cause to support already so you don't waste time pursuing a dead end. The good news is that almost 80% of PSA directors will continue to support the same community messages as previous years.



**Now let's get to the good stuff.**

# **HOW TO CREATE AN EFFECTIVE AD CAMPAIGN**

We've been at this for a long time, and we've seen the landscape grow more competitive even as it's become more diversified. A strategic approach is more important than ever to help your Public Service Announcement (PSA) gain traction. This guide covers every step—from strategy to campaign analytics—to maximize your PSA's reach and impact.

## **THE FOUR STEPS TO AN EFFECTIVE AD CAMPAIGN:**

- 1. Strategy**
- 2. Creative Development**
- 3. Distribution & Promotion**
- 4. Tracking & Analytics**

# STRATEGY

First of all, make sure you follow PSA guidelines.

## Craft a strong call to action (CTA)

Your CTA must be clear and measurable. While you **can't directly request donations**, you can encourage actions like "help," "join," or "learn."



## Find ways to target your audience

While targeting by demographic isn't possible with PSAs, there are strategies we use to reach your key audience. We start with the top 10 Designated Market Areas (DMAs). We overlap those with the top DMAs based on client-provided data (e.g. donor locations, local resources) and combine those results with our proprietary data to identify which markets are most likely to air your PSA—and deliver the biggest impact.



## What you can & cannot say in a PSA

### CAN

- Ask for "help"
- Ask viewers to "join" us
- Encourage viewers to go to a website "for more information"
- General use of "support" (eg: "find out how you can support your neighbor...")



### CANNOT

- Any language about giving (including "Donate", and "Money")
- Most TV stations won't air PSAs with corporate mentions or logos. Some allow brief, subtle branding (2-4 seconds, no audio), but only if the message remains mission-focused rather than promotional.



# CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

## Quality counts

Creative that is well-executed with a clear message is essential. While live action television spots may be slightly more effective according to our research, animation can pack an emotional punch with a smaller hit to your wallet.



## Get emotional

People “buy” on emotion and justify on logic. If you engage their hearts, you will win their minds. First-hand accounts of individual beneficiaries versus groups of people have the most impact, followed by messages that are supported by facts and stats.



## Keep it fresh

Many **PSA Directors prefer new creative every year at a minimum**. Clients who **release new spots every six months** see spikes in airings.



## Make it relevant

PSAs tied to **current events or major social issues** get more airplay. The most-aired PSAs themes vary year over year, but consistently the top five focus on:

1. Healthcare
2. Children
3. Poverty/Human Services
4. Disaster Relief
5. Education



## Provide multiple spot lengths

TV and radio **favor :30-second PSAs the most**, then :15, :60, :10, and even :05 spots can boost airplay. Offering **varied lengths** increases placement opportunities.



## Final production checklist

- **Closed captioning** (ADA compliance)
- **ISCI code** (Industry tracking via Nielsen)
- **HD & SD versions** (Network preference)

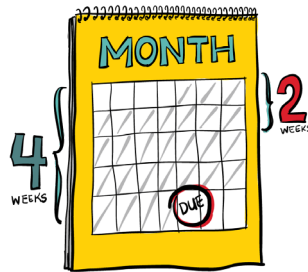


# PSA DISTRIBUTION & PROMOTION

## Distribution

### Time your release

- Best PSA airtime availability: Q1, June– August, November–December
- PSA creative lifespan: 6–12 months
- Distribute PSAs at the start of the year for maximum exposure, distribute 2x a year.
- Submit PSAs at least 30 days before the airdate.



## Promotion

### It's who you know

This is a relationship-driven business. And we work hard to make sure everyone wins. Unlike mass-market distributors, Yes& takes a **boutique approach**.

**We work with one PSA Campaign at a time, focusing on personalized outreach to station decision-makers.** That means when we contact station gatekeepers, we are doing it for one client with a Director of Outreach assigned exclusively to you. The stations know us and take our calls. The results are the payoff. Our PSA clients are in the top **10% of all PSAs aired nationally**.



### We follow the data

Our proprietary media database tracks nearly 3,600 media outlets and 4,000 contacts, including TV, radio, print, digital, and alternative media. It contains:

- PSA placement preferences
- Airings trends
- Direct station feedback

Our PSA clients are in the

# TOP 10%

of all PSAs aired nationally.



# Our promotion strategies

## Getting noticed

Launching a PSA is a carefully calibrated exercise. We begin with a postcard or mailer distributed to PSA Directors 30 days prior to a campaign launch to introduce them to the campaign and get them excited about the release to come. Then, we release the campaign through a national distributor which includes an overview of the campaign, a reason to air, and basic trafficking instructions. The next step is pitching.



## Pitching where it matters

1. **Level One:** Outreach to the national networks (ABC, CBS, etc.), cable networks (Discovery, ESPN, etc.).
2. **Level Two:** Outreach to the PSA Directors of the top television stations in the top 10 markets that match your strategic objectives. This outreach is planned—we devise a pitch calendar that identifies when we will call or email, and the nature of our pitch. We typically recommend reaching out to PSA Directors in equally spaced intervals, as we want to keep our message top-of-mind but not inundate them.



## Keeping your PSA top of mind

Interest peaks at launch, but attention can fade quickly. To maintain momentum, we:

- **Regularly pitch stations**, check airings, and request additional placements.
- **Align campaigns with relevant events and awareness weeks/months** (e.g., National Cancer Prevention Month for American Institute for Cancer Research or National Consumer Protection Week for USPIS).
- **Create custom media hooks** when needed, such as the “Patriotic Six”, the six weeks between Memorial Day and Independence Day for the USO.
- **We highlight what makes your issue stand out locally** and personalize pitches with community-specific stories of individuals who benefited from the organization.
- **We prioritize in-person pitches** when possible. They leave lasting impressions and often turn PSA Directors into long-term advocates.
- **We say THANK YOU!** Strong media relationships require ongoing appreciation. Since we use all-digital distribution, we send thoughtful, themed gifts throughout the year—small gestures that make a big impact on our media partners.



# TRACKING & ANALYTICS

We use third-party tracking to monitor PSA airings, estimated media value, and impressions, capturing when and where each PSA airs. This data helps assess ROI and refine future outreach. Dashboards, updated monthly, provide clear, shareable campaign insights.

## Television

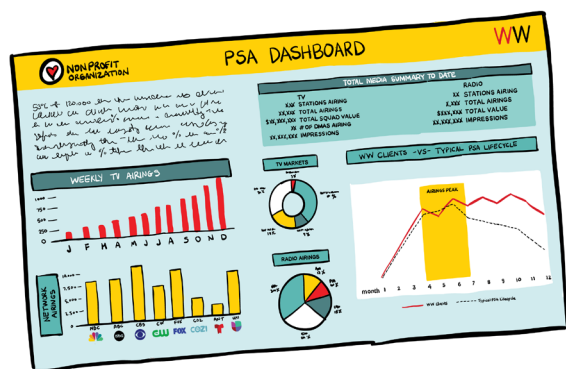
TV spots are tracked via SIGMA, detecting embedded signals to log airings by market, station, date, time, and length. Nielsen assigns audience impressions, while SQAD determines media value based on real ad buys.

## Radio

Media Monitors uses similar technology to monitor radio airings but does not track all stations in all languages. For non-monitored stations, we rely on self-reported data from stations.

## Out-of-home

For OOH media, we depend on posting organizations for valuation, including location, creative details, duration, estimated value, and audience reach.



## Key metrics of success

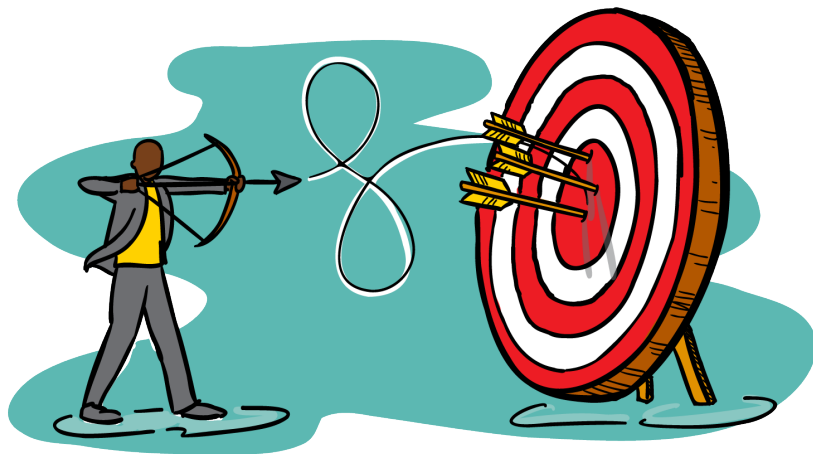
- **Media value:** SQAD provides CPM (cost per thousand) media values for each market and daypart, based on actual paid media buys that occurred during the previous month. When our distributor receives airing information from Nielsen's SIGMA, they match the daypart of the airing to the CPM value for that airing's daypart. The media value for that airing is determined by multiplying the CPM value with the audience value for that airing provided by Nielsen (divided by 1,000).
- **Network airings:** High-value national placements in premium programming.
- **Market penetration:** Prioritizing top 50 DMAs for maximum reach and donor exposure.
- **Daytime & primetime airings:** Essential for effective audience engagement.
- **Data provided by trackable URLs, hashtags, and landing pages**
- **Client-provided data on donations during the PSA life cycle**
- **Brand awareness (aided and unaided) post campaign launch**

**That's it in a nutshell.**

# A PRETTY BIG NUTSHELL.

It's a challenge to consolidate dozens of years of phone calls emails, handshakes, pitches, campaign launches, late night work sessions, big victory celebrations, and all the in-between that makes a successful PSA into one document. And we're sure we left some of the juicy bits out. But we hope we've given you plenty to mull over when it comes to PSAs. If PSAs are an option for your organization (and if you're reading this, they must be) we'd be happy to talk with you about building a strategy that works best for your mission. And we'll be sure to share the few things we couldn't cover here. So, give us your biggest challenge. We live for this stuff.

**Sources:** 2024 Yes& Annual PSA Survey, 2024 Yes& Annual Donor Survey





**Yes& is an integrated marketing agency** serving complex needs across the commercial, association, B2G, higher education, and government sectors. Yes& brings "positivity + possibility" through an expanding suite of capabilities including branding, digital strategy and analytics, advertising, customer experience (CX), market research, content development, events, and public relations, and serves clients nationwide from its hubs in the Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Philadelphia areas. Yes& is ranked by the Washington Business Journal as the #2 largest privately held advertising agency in the greater DC area and has been listed by Inc. magazine as one of the fastest-growing privately held companies in the U.S. seven times.



**Contact us:** [hello@yesandagency.com](mailto:hello@yesandagency.com)  
**Visit us:** [yesandagency.com](https://yesandagency.com)  
**Call us:** (703) 823-1600