



Media Statement / 20 August 2021

COVID Comms launches new national COVID-19 communications campaign

COVID Comms, a civil society network of communications volunteers, has launched a new COVID-19 public education campaign in support of the national drive to bring the pandemic under control.

Our 'Prevent the Fourth Wave' campaign consists of infographics, animated videos and sound files focusing on three key areas: Prevention, Vaccination, and Information.

Our prevention message builds on the non-pharmaceutical steps that have been in place since the national lockdown was introduced more than 500 days ago. We are emphasising the importance of three key practices that South Africans are already familiar with: social distancing, wearing face masks, and frequent hand-washing. We have added a new set of messages relating to ventilation, as this is increasingly being recognised as a significant way of reducing the transmission of the Coronavirus. A representative from the organisation Green Flag will explain this in detail a little later.

COVID Comms Secretariate member Tessa Dooms says: "Our vaccination message is simple and is a direct call to all eligible groups to get vaccinated as soon as possible. It's clear that the initial spark of interest by the vaccine early adopters has diminished quite quickly, and we hope that our vaccination messaging will inspire both vaccine hesitant and vaccine resisters to register for their COVID-19 vaccination and get their jab as soon as possible. It's the right thing to do.

"Our information messaging is aimed to countering the growing tide of misinformation and disinformation that is being spread around COVID-19 in general and the vaccines in particular. Our campaign material, old and new, has provided explanations for many aspects of COVID-19, and the various vaccine options, in the belief that this will cut through the noise and provide information – in plain language, and in at least six South African languages – that will help turn the tide against the flow of false information."

A key element of our campaign material is that it is extremely easy to use and share. All the material is available, for free download, on our website (www.covidcomms.org.za). We urge people to visit the website and access whatever material they feel is useful, and to share this in as many ways as possible.

To people with access to social media, our call is simple: please stop spreading disinformation -- and rather spread our information products, and those produced by other credible organisations. We make the same call to people on Whatsapp groups: if you receive something which is clearly disinformation, don't spread it. Report it to the Real 411 network or other entities directly involved in identifying false information.

Instead of spreading false information and conspiracy theories, we encourage everyone who has an interest in playing a positive role to download information products from our website and share them far and wide – on neighborhood Whatsapp groups, on family groups, and on workplace or community groups. And if you would like to join one of our own COVID Comms Whatsapp distribution groups, please register to do so on our website.

“Disinformation is fueling vaccine hesitancy. Rather spread the facts, which are presented in plain language and multiple languages on our site, and play a role in becoming a personal vaccine ambassador,” says Dooms.

“The truth is one of our most powerful weapons during a public health emergency like the one we find ourselves in. We need to spread the truth, not the virus.”

The role of the media

COVID Comms has also issued a call to the South African media fraternity to play a greater role in making basic health information available to the public.

“TV, radio and digital media reach millions of people every day, and we believe the media could play a greater role in massifying vital messages about COVID-19 and how to combat it,” says COVID Comms chairperson Chris Vick.

“We have already made several breakthroughs in expanding our reach and developing new distribution platforms. We are deeply appreciative of the role the SABC and MultiChoice have played so far in broadcasting some of our information products on their platforms. These have been broadcast as public service announcements, at no cost to us, and have reached listeners and viewers across the country.

“We are also appreciative of new commitments from the publishers of Daily Maverick and News24 in recent days to use our infographics and animated videos to illustrate news coverage of articles on COVID-19. This is significantly increasing our reach and impact, and we salute their commitment.

“But we all need to do more,” says Vick.

“For some weeks now, COVID Comms has been calling on the media fraternity to up its game. Although PSAs and inserts are helpful, what we really need is for prime time viewers to be exposed to vital public health messaging.

“We have therefore been in discussion with a number of media houses about a ‘prime time challenge’ in which we call on broadcasters, in particular, to make prime time airtime

available at no cost – or at least at significantly discounted rates -- so that we can touch the soapie audiences, the people (particularly men) watching soccer matches, and the millions who are locked into reality TV. These platforms are expensive, but free or discounted prime time would ensure an exponential increase in the reach of COVID-19 messages.”

A number of civil society organisations have already endorsed this call, which COVID Comms deeply appreciates. Some media organisations have also come on board. For example ADreach, a strategic outdoor branding company, has donated R1-million worth of street pole advertising to our Fourth Wave campaign, for which we are truly grateful.

We have also received a commitment from more than 150 community newspapers that cover all 11 South African languages and have a reach of 4.2 million people to distribute our content at minimal printing costs, waving the advertising fees, ensuring we reach some of the audiences that are most in need of accurate, accessible information in their own language.

The SABC has also responded well, and has given us significant discounts on radio and TV airtime should we be able to provide some corporate funding.

But to make these arrangements truly meaningful, we need corporate South Africa to also respond to our ‘prime time challenge’ and to support the flighting of our Fourth Wave campaign material on high-visibility platforms across the commercial media.

We have undertaken to the SABC that, unlike commercial agencies, we will take no commission on the placement of any COVID-19 advertising by corporates working in partnership with COVID Comms. This means more bang for the corporate buck and will, we believe, make a significant impact on public awareness of the three key aspects of our campaign: Prevention, Vaccination and Information.

At the same time, we would like to increase our interaction with the editorial decision-makers around how to make better use of news broadcasts to build vaccine confidence and overcome vaccine hesitancy. Today, we would like to formally invite news managers to call on us if there is a need for ideas or suggestions around how to cover COVID-19 differently. At the same time, we’d like to call for greater collaboration between everyone who shares our commitment to use our skills and networks to intensify public communication around COVID-19.

“There can be no doubt that a renewed national effort is needed to contain COVID-19 by non-pharmaceutical means, and to protect our people by vaccination. Vaccine hesitancy is increasing, and so is active resistance,” says Vick.

“We need all hands on deck. We need all the communications help we can muster. And we need it now, in as many forms as possible, in as many languages as possible, so that it reaches as many people as possible.”

- **For more information: Chris Vick / chris@covidcomms.org.za**