

How the ‘Early Birds’ help find cancer earlier

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Introduction

Earlier detection of cancer plays an important role in cancer control. The earlier someone is diagnosed, the more likely they are to have a better outcome.

A new Detect Cancer Earlier (DCE) Programme behaviour change campaign was launched in March 2023 to remind people of the importance of getting possible signs of cancer checked sooner rather than later.

The campaign targets people aged 40+ in areas of higher deprivation, as they are more likely to be diagnosed with cancer, and at an advanced stage.

Methodology

Independent surveys showed that over 80% of the target audience were aware that detecting cancer early saves lives. However, in-depth qualitative research¹ revealed that despite rational acknowledgement of this, associations were predominantly pessimistic, causing many to push all cancer messaging from their mind.

Rather than emphasising how ‘early detection saves lives’, we identified an opportunity to highlight some of the ‘smaller’ ways acting early can make a difference.

Proposition testing research identified 3 benefits that were most credible and motivating:

- Better news to tell your loved ones.
- More treatment options.
- A greater chance of living well again.

The challenge was to bring these messages to life in a way that would stand out, against the ‘ultra real’ approach of cancer charities. Creative teams spotted an opportunity to draw on a famous proverb - ‘the early bird catches the worm’ - and transform the cancer conversation in Scotland.

Aims/Objectives

Social marketing plays an important role in reducing later stage disease. Improving public education and empowerment is highlighted as a priority within the Cancer Strategy for Scotland (published June 2023). Activating targeted Detect Cancer Earlier campaigns aimed at those in areas of deprivation is included within the Cancer Action Plan for Scotland (2023-2026).

Results

Among the target audience, 4 out of 5 campaign SMART objectives were met or exceeded², illustrating excellent awareness of the campaign and action being taken as a result.

SMART Objective	Target set	Achieved
Increase the proportion who identify all 3 benefits of taking action to detect cancer earlier mentioned in the campaign.	25% (+2pp)	25% (+2pp)
Maintain the proportion who say they are very likely to contact their GP practice with suspected cancer symptoms.	56% (-)	60% (+4pp)
Increase the proportion who disagree that they wouldn’t want to find out if they had cancer because they would be worried about the impact on their family.	57% (+2pp)	56% (+1pp)
Campaign awareness (prompted recognition).	60%	67%
Proportion of recognisers taking action as a result of the campaign.	70%	73%

Chart 1

While the objective to maintain the proportion of the target audience who disagree that they wouldn’t want to find out if they had cancer, because they would be worried about the impact on their family, was narrowly missed, there was some positive movement.

Changing entrenched attitudes and beliefs such as fear around cancer can take time and repeated exposure to positive messaging. This indicates a need to continue efforts to shift these long-held attitudes.



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

References

1. Campaign Insight Gathering Research, Scott Porter Research & Marketing, 2022.
2. Campaign Evaluation Research, Phase 3, JRS The Research Consortium, 2024.