

# Targeting opportunities

Using the COM-B model to target opportunities.

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## Practice points

1. Think about messages that make desired behaviours more visible and common, such as encouraging people to resist pressure to engage in sexist behaviour, not support it, and to speak out against it when necessary.
2. Consider messaging that highlights the most common situations and events that trigger sexist behaviours to reduce their incidence or escalation.
3. Consider messaging that sensitises the audience to the environmental cues that help people to challenge sexist behaviours at the time or to reflect on them at a later opportunity.
4. Consider putting prompts in visible locations, reminding officers and staff of expectations regarding unacceptable behaviour and promoting behaviour that challenges this.

When targeting opportunities, messaging is often aimed at shaping social norms or the environmental triggers that prompt behaviour.

Opportunity consists of all the features of a person's social and physical environment that make a behaviour possible or facilitate it.

## Social opportunity

'Social opportunity' is the term used to describe features of the social environment that enable or facilitate behaviours. It includes support networks, social rules and norms. Support networks can be informal groups of people who can provide us with practical or emotional support when we need it, or formal support groups that may be set up by organisations.

Social rules stipulate what we must and must not do, and are often accompanied by sanctions such as fines or imprisonment when we break them. In organisations, social rules can involve disciplinary action or compulsory training to promote conformance.

Social norms are unwritten rules about what is conventional, accepted and commonplace. In social science, a distinction is made between:

- 'descriptive norms' – which simply state what most people are doing or believing
- 'injunctive norms' – which involve a moral judgement about what is and is not acceptable

(Staunton and others, 2014; McDonald and Nijhof, 1999.)

Both can be very powerful drivers of behaviour.

## Physical opportunity

Physical opportunity consists of material resources and finances, access to facilities and locations, and time. In behavioural science, it has been found that the immediate physical environment plays a crucial role in constraining and facilitating behaviour (Cozens, Saville and Hillier, 2005; Inman and Jeffrey, 2006). That is why, for example, we create physical barriers to stop people doing things and why governments provide financial resources for business and individuals to enable them to do things that benefit both themselves and society, such as investing in green infrastructure.

Environmental cues, reminders or triggers also play a key role in promoting certain behaviours. For example, adding a shortcut to everyone's computer desktops to remind people and make it easier to report inappropriate behaviour.

When it comes to sexist behaviours, two aspects of opportunity make potentially important targets for messaging.

1. The audience's sense of what is normal (social opportunity).
2. The triggers that prompt desirable and undesirable behaviours (physical opportunity).

## Shaping people's sense of what is normal

There are numerous examples of organisations in which formal rules say one thing but 'custom and practice' differ. (McDonald and Nijhof, 1999; Lawton, 1998; Calcagno and Lopez, 2017.)

In those circumstances, people find it very hard to go against custom and practice – the informal, but powerful descriptive norms operating in their environment. We see people behaving in a certain way and getting away with it and we feel a social pressure to go along with it.

Communication campaigns are crucial in bridging this gap. They can directly combat perceptions that unacceptable behaviours are commonplace and normal (Kilmartin and others, 2008). They can also increase the visibility and therefore the perceived normality of desired behaviour. This includes not going along with sexist behaviour when we encounter it in others, not rewarding it with approval, and challenging it where appropriate.

Communications campaigns need to be based on a sound understanding of existing norms in the target audience, as well as a very clear sense of what new norms they are aiming to promote. For example, if the existing norm is to keep one's head down and not cause trouble, it is important to establish a new norm of getting involved to help make the police a more professional service.

## Environmental triggers

Human behaviour is highly responsive to the immediate environment. When we encounter the same triggers, we tend to respond in the same way.

Sexist behaviours often occur in scenarios and in the presence of social triggers that prompt a response that is habitual and not thought through. If we can identify these triggers and engineer them out of the environment, we can potentially reduce the incidence of sexist behaviours.

## Audience research

Audience research can help. We can find out from audience what situations and events seem most likely to prompt sexist behaviours. We can then consider highlighting these as 'sexism hot spots' in communications, with a view to addressing them (for example, work social events, use of personal devices and the arrival of new recruits).

## Using cues

Conversely, we can potentially use messaging from multiple channels to sensitise the audience to cues that can lead people to challenge sexism. This will include cues in scenarios where sexist behaviour is unfolding in the moment (for example, it could show an escalation in behaviour during a work social event), as well as scenarios where people can reflect on what happened earlier, such as a conversation at work.

It may be useful to prompt people to replay what occurred in their minds after an event, in order to identify the cues leading up to the inappropriate behaviour. They can consider what they would

have liked to have done and what would make it easier to do this if they are in that situation again.

## References

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## Tags

Violence against women and girls