

Using crosswords as a health education tool

Many newspapers and magazines regularly use crosswords and competitions as part of their mix due to their popularity. Fortunately, a range of companies now produce software that makes creating crosswords and puzzles fairly easy.

How to use and fund crossword books

One way of using crosswords would be to produce regular free puzzle books or magazines on a health theme. This format is probably more useful for drawing people in and passing on information than motivating change. As they may take in only a little from the clues, the books themselves should perhaps also contain supporting articles on health.

Health adverts could also be included. Alternatively, the books could be funded through appropriate paid for advertisements. Including competitions in the book would appeal to many readers. It would also be a way of measuring what response the book gets. Commercial magazine publishers often do this. A thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of using crosswords to give out information would also be vital.

The books could be distributed to places that the research shows the target audience go to or sent directly to their homes. They might also be popular in NHS waiting rooms.

Be clear about the audience for a puzzle book

Be clear about what target groups a magazine of crosswords and puzzles would appeal to. Check out

- Whether the format is one that they take seriously as a health education vehicle
- What kind of puzzles are appropriate and the level of difficulty
- Whether there is a need for a variety of puzzle books for different target groups or if one size fits all
- What the puzzle book should look like etc.
- What the demand is for the puzzle book. How many do you need and how often should you produce a new edition

Be clear about aim of a puzzle book

The aims of a puzzle book could include

- To give out health education around information, attitudes and skills
- To create a particular image. This is so the information is more likely to be accepted e.g. we aren't anti-fun, we just want you to enjoy a drink safely
- To promote a particular image of the organisation e.g. we understand you or we're approachable. The kind of image created will depend on
 - What the book looks like
 - The choice of questions
 - What the prizes are
 - The supporting articles
 - The pictures used

Appropriate quotes from the target audience or people they aspire to be might

also be useful.

How to make a crossword

When I experimented with making a crossword, I started by writing out about 200 health questions. These need to tie-in with your strategic aims and what you know about the target group. What do they need to know? What will motivate them? Then I wrote out a list of words that made up the answers. The software then created the crossword square. (It still needed to put in an odd word with nothing to do with the topic to make it work.) I ended up with a lot less than 200 questions.

If you don't think you have the skills to produce one on your own, you might find a local volunteer to help you. Alternatively, you can pay a professional crossword compiler to make them for you. For contacts and costs go to <http://www.londonfreelance.org/feesguide/index.php?language=en&country=UK§ion=Crosswords&subsect=All> .

The skill is not just in filling up all the squares but writing clues that are neither too hard nor too easy for the target audience. Remember to test out a pilot version with them before printing thousands of copies.

Possible variety of approaches

Research will tell you what kinds of puzzles are most popular with your target audience and how hard they should be. As the main aim of the approach is educational, crosswords should probably make up the bulk of any health puzzle magazine. However, there may be uses for other formats as well.

Crosswords

It may be a good idea to vary the crosswords if evidence suggests that this would make the magazine more popular. Types of crosswords could include

- A 'normal' crossword on no particular theme. This might be useful if there is a danger of too many health based ones making the magazine appear too worthy
- One on general health topics
- One that mixed health and popular culture questions. As well as educational questions they could include some lighter ones. For example, around celebrity chefs on a nutrition themed crossword
- A crossword where instead of straight forward clues there is a story or information about health with missing words. These missing words are the crossword clues. These might be good for exploring issues in a bit more depth, including looking at attitudes and skills
- A slightly harder crossword which encourages readers to get information from health articles in the puzzle book to be able to finish it. (What hard means of course will depend on the audience)
- A prize crossword that requires readers to ask other people for help or look up answers on the internet. (This might also be away of encouraging people to find out about websites or services that you want to promote)
- There is also a site that helps produce anagrams at www.anagramgenius.com/ .

Other kinds of puzzle

- A word search might be useful to reinforce new concepts or familiarise people with necessary jargon
- A quiz might also be popular. Again, consider what percentage of the questions should be educational and how many should be trivial or not health related
- A picture quiz might be a fun way of promoting new health buildings, important services etc
- Sometimes people need reassuring that staff of a particular service are friendly or are like them. A spot the difference picture game might be one way of illustrating this
- Number based puzzles like Sudoku are probably impossible to link to health. However, they are popular and may help make the book feel less worthy. One might work well on a page of useful (telephone) numbers or statistics
- Personality tests similar to those in women's magazines, on health themes, might be popular with some target groups
- If you want to get mobile numbers to text people particular health information, consider a competition where they have to text to take part. This could be time consuming of course. People would also still have to give you permission for further texts. However, it might be worthwhile in some circumstances if you can then send them additional information. Also consider other options such as email

If the puzzle book is for families from a particular background, some of the above formats may also want to be repeated at a level suitable for children.

Cover design

I have noticed that many crossword puzzle books have a crossword on the front plus often a more interesting image. Test out if this look works with your target group. Does it help them quickly realise what the publication is? Do they pick it up?

An alternate approach might be to have a 'What would you do?' question with an illustration and text on the front. This could be based around first aid, putting out a fire or other dramatic storylines. As well as being educational, it might grab people's attention. It also fits in with a publication that is about puzzles, questions and quizzes. The answer plus additional information would be given inside. Another similar option would be to put a 'True or False?' health question on the cover.

Spin-offs and follow on

To create even more opportunities to reach people tell them that there are more puzzles on your website. The answers to your crossword magazine could be there too. As an alternative, you could have them in the next issue to encourage people to look out for it. Of course, if issues are infrequent or the target group aren't online, it would be easier to put the answers at the bottom of the page.

Remember to copyright the puzzle book so that you can sell it to other organisations if you want to.

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