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## RNLI: 'Respect the Water' Campaign – Putting Prevention First

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‘Respect the Water’ Campaign – Putting Prevention First  
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*“Extend your arms, legs and life expectancy. If you fall into water, fight your instinct to swim until the cold water shock passes, pause, and float on your back until you are able to catch your breath.”*

### **Context**

The RNLI is the charity that saves lives at sea and has been striving to end preventable loss of life around the UK and Irish coast since 1824. It provides an on call, a 24-hour lifeboat search and rescue service, a seasonal lifeguard service and a responsive flood rescue team. It now has a comprehensive network of 237 lifeboat stations including eight inland locations such as the iconic river Thames in London, and Loch Ness in Scotland. This service is reliant on thousands of unpaid volunteer crew.

The RNLI has always had an interest in prevention, stretching back to the 1800’s when sailors were given barometers to check if it was safe to go to sea, but its primary focus has always been search and rescue. This started to change during the 1990’s when a sea safety initiative was established to focus on preventing accidents by offering free fishing boat ‘health checks’. The charity took another huge step in 2001 when it established a lifeguard service, which by its very nature is preventative and views rescue as the last resort.

### **The Catalyst for Change**

This focus on prevention has continued to evolve but hit a cross roads in 2011 when the organisation asked itself a difficult question, how can we save more lives? To answer this honestly a better understanding of the problem was required, so the RNLI started analysing coastal fatality and incident data to establish who is most at-risk.

This evidence-based approach has changed the way the RNLI operates, no longer just celebrating a busy year of rescue, but instead focusing on reducing risk to the public and its own volunteer crew and lifeguards and driving down fatalities and serious incidents. An ambitious target of halving coastal fatalities by 2024 has now been set, but that can only be achieved through partnership work with likeminded organisations and approaching lifesaving in a different way.

### **Our Approach**

This evidence-based approach has refocused prevention work on those most at risk and starts to isolate specific behaviour changes that will keep people safer and save more lives. Examples include knowing that wearing a personal flotation device is the key message we need to communicate with rock anglers, or carrying a means of calling for help you can reach in the event of capsize when out kayaking.

To communicate these messages effectively the RNLI's prevention activity needed an identity, so an overarching campaign was created in 2013 that's sole purpose is drowning prevention.

### **The Role of Marketing and Communication**

That national campaign is called Respect the Water, and it puts drowning prevention at the heart of everything the RNLI does. It has been developed using best practice from other successful public safety campaigns such as Think! (road safety) & Fire Kills (fire safety) and put changing people's behaviour and saving lives from drowning front and centre.

The campaign was created in 2013 and has spoken to many different people about water safety, including targeted messaging to those who enjoy activities such as scuba diving or angling, but also more general awareness messaging to those most at risk, adult men.

Now that the campaign has been established, communication to different groups of people can be dialled up when most needed; talking to commercial fisherman about stability during January, their most dangerous month, or putting water safety on the general public's agenda during the spring and summer with a national advertising campaign by talking about risks like cold water shock.

### **The Impact**

Research and evaluation have not only been pivotal in developing our campaigns, but also have proved they've helped save a large number of lives because people recalled lifesaving messages that helped them survive a life-threatening situation in the water.

The presentation discussed key findings we've learned along the way which others may find useful when developing drowning prevention campaigns. The findings include the importance of:

- Keeping your message simple and useful.
- Understanding and targeting the right people with your message.
- Deciding who and how your message is most effectively delivered.
- Working in partnerships with people who may have more influence than you.
- Not just relying on your subjective opinion as a subject matter expert!



Ross MacLeod led the creation of Respect the Water, the RNLI national drowning prevention campaign, which plays a vital role alongside the charity's lifeboats & lifeguards to prevent drowning. The presentation includes background to the campaign and lessons learnt that may help others apply drowning prevention research to public safety campaigns. Ross Macleod is Strategic Marketing Manager (Prevention & Brand Health) at RNLI leading campaigns to increase risk awareness, influence positive attitudes to safety and ultimately lead to a reduction in

drowning. He has worked as a Coastal Safety Manager, Senior Lifeguard (UK & NZ), Swimming teacher, Scuba Diving Instructor, and studied marketing.



<http://www.respectthewater.com/>