Excellence Awards - 2021 Entry
85 Tottenham Court Road
London. W1T 4TQ
020 7631 6900

Entry ID: 9339

Third Party Authorization

Are you entering on behalf of, or in association with, any third party?:	Yes
If yes, please tick here to confirm you have the third party's permission to submit this entry:	Checked

Basic Information

Category:	23. Best COVID response - FREE

Entry Information

Entrant company name:	King's College London
Client name (for joint entries only):	ZOE
Entry title:	

Giving scientists real time data to fight COVID

Entry

Brief, objectives and budget:

Crisis: Scientists lack data to fight COVID-19:

As 2020 started, the world faced the threat of a totally novel virus, COVID-19. From early reports, it was clear that there were a wide range of symptoms, which differed from person to person. Scientists were desperately looking for rapid access to data to learn more about the virus and gain insight into its manifestation and spread.

Objective: Attract enough contributors to provide real-time data

In March 2020, the ZOE COVID Symptom Study app was launched. Built by a team of developers from health science startup ZOE over a sleepless weekend, its aim was to provide scientists at King's College London with real-time data to enable them to track symptoms and ultimately slow the spread of the virus.

The idea, research and planning:

A joint PR campaign was launched between King's College London and ZOE to attract the media and public to the project, using press releases, digital content and social media to rapidly spread the word about the app and encourage people to download and log their symptoms.

With no available budget and a lean team, communications relied on having a clear press strategy, engaging social media and a strong partnership to ensure that all available channels were being used effectively.
Within a fortnight, there were two million contributors across the UK revealing vital information about the spread of COVID-19.

Strategy, creativity and innovation:

Strategy: Stay ahead of the curve

The public's engagement with the app and the resulting research was key to making this project a success, encouraging existing members to continue to log their symptoms and attracting new members to sign-up. A key part of the PR strategy was to provide the media and the public with access to the very latest research by press releasing pre-print scientific papers for the first time. Historically, these would have had to wait months for full peer-review and formal journal acceptance. However, given the fast-paced nature of the pandemic and the need for real-time information, this was justified, while ensuring that the appropriate caveats were made clear.

This crucially meant that when the data from the app started to show that loss of taste and smell - anosmia - was a highly predictive symptom of COVID-19, we were able to publicise that straight away. Indeed, this finding and the resulting media coverage, led to the BBC referring to the research in a Downing Street press conference and ultimately the government adding this onto the official list of COVID-19 symptoms in May 2020.

Delivery/implementation of tactics:

To supplement this strategy, other activity aimed at keeping the public and media up-to-date and engaged included weekly data press releases to all national media outlets, blogs and weekly YouTube videos from the lead researcher Professor Tim Spector. In addition, those signed up to the app are invited to science webinars with panels of experts to find out directly what their data shows at different points during the pandemic. The webinars have been watched by over 500,000 people. These engagement activities meant that when COVID cases fell over the summer, the media and the public's interest in the app remained, enabling the team to continue to access important data during the lull and consequently be the first to identify new hotspots as the second wave took hold.

We worked with a range of reporters across the health, science, education, business and consumer press in the UK and the US, successfully using our partnership to establish strong relationships with key journalists. By providing regular and reliable data and commentary on COVID-19, we were able to position the ZOE COVID Symptom Study app, Professor Tim Spector and King's College London as a trusted authority on

COVID-19 around the world. Crucially, users of the app also had a keen sense that they were making a vital contribution to the fight against COVID.

We used exclusives to create impact and reach larger audiences, including with the Today programme on Radio 4, the BBC, the New York Times and the Daily Mail online. We also used the BBC's regional networks to ensure that local data was covered in the relevant regions and to keep app users across the country engaged. This included the issue of Long COVID which was identified through research and data from the app, supported by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock and by working with the BBC on the initial exclusive, covered widely in global media outlets. Social media was also a key part of our multi-channel strategy, using King's College London's channels and ZOE's blog to reach a wide audience. Lead scientists on the project also used their personal channels to post updates and engage with new and existing users of the app. This included responding directly to questions about the science and feedback about the app, making necessary adjustments to improve the user experience where possible.

Measurement, evaluation and impact:

To date, the app has more than 4.5 million contributors worldwide. Users have collectively logged more than 285 million daily health reports, more than 3.4 million tests and 655,000 vaccines, making it the biggest COVID-19 study of its kind in the world and providing near-real time information about the pandemic to the UK government and the public.

Since the launch of the app, there's been over 27,872 pieces of media coverage, 11,900 social media posts and over 5.3million views on YouTube. Professor Tim Spector has become one of the most prominent scientists during the pandemic and a trusted source of information, quoted approximately 19,491 times in the media, well above other academics who were officially part of The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). His work on the app and its data was also formally recognised when he received an OBE for his contribution to the health services in the New Year's Honours.

Initially funded by ZOE and crowdfunding, the app project was awarded a £2 million grant from the Department of Health and Social Care in August 2020 in recognition of its continuing vital contribution to the UK's fight against COVID-19.

Supporting Information

Campaign image (if entering individual/team awards, upload headshot/team photo here):

Provided

Company logo:

Provided

Please write a 30 word entry summary in the third person:

PR campaign that helped to create the biggest COVID-19 study of its kind in the world, providing near-real time information about the pandemic to the UK government and the public.