

## INSIGHTS & ANALYSIS

The Centre for Ocular Research & Education (CORE) is one of the foremost ophthalmic research organizations in the world, based at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. In June 2020, as part of daily media monitoring, the communications team spotted a mention by an ophthalmologist of increased dry eyes from wearing masks, which he called Mask-Associated Dry Eye (MADE). Sensing this had the potential to be a high interest topic given the projected increase in mask use, the team needed to determine if there were opportunities for CORE to share scientific and clinical knowledge with medical peers, help patients, and gain brand exposure.

- **Assess the Medical Validity.** As there was only a singular MADE mention in June, CORE staff undertook a review of scientific literature on dryness associated with changes in airflow across eyes. In addition, through social monitoring and industry discussions, we began to see a small number of additional reports of the condition from optometrists. MADE was deemed to be authentic and new.
- **Measure Current Storyline Exposure.** Although the condition was growing in prevalence, weekly media audits showed almost zero discussion in professional and consumer media and no additional use of the MADE acronym; CORE could potentially own the topic.
- **Weigh Potential Interest Among Clinical and Mainstream Media.** With mask mandates just starting to be implemented and journalists looking for new COVID-19 stories, we queried journalists about a MADE narrative. Their feedback matched our instincts, i.e., there would be even greater interest by keeping the tone positive, in that the condition can be identified and easily self-addressed.
- **Consider Likely Program Demands with CORE Resources.** As a small non-profit organization whose staff was contending with fast-changing lockdown issues and keeping other critical research and clinical care programs afloat, CORE could not drop everything and focus on MADE. Nor was it receiving any educational or other incremental funding to tell the MADE story. The initiative would have to take place over an 18-month span, with the team finding small pockets of time to plan and implement a multi-phase approach.

## PLANNING

### OBJECTIVES

- **Create acknowledgement and understanding of MADE (Mask-Associated Dry Eye) among global eye care professionals,** gaining at least 15 clinical stories in six countries by December 31, 2020, with the same in 2021 assuming the pandemic continued.
- **Develop awareness of MADE among the general population,** helping drive them to take preventative action, with at least 50 million mainstream media impressions by December 31, 2020, with the same in 2021 assuming the pandemic continued.
- **Generate new project/program opportunities for CORE among current and potential industry sponsors** based on MADE-related efforts, having garnered at least three serious expressions of interest during the program time frame.

### AUDIENCES

1. **Eye care professionals (ECPs)** who needed to understand the underlying causes of MADE, so they could alert and counsel patients.
2. **The general population** who could take steps to reduce their own susceptibility to MADE.
3. **Ophthalmic industry manufacturers/retailers** who might look to expand or begin a relationship with CORE for future programs.

### KEY MESSAGES

- ❖ Cases of dry, uncomfortable eyes among the general population are on the rise from mask use—a new condition called MADE.
- ❖ Eye care professionals should consider incorporating three MADE-related actions into their patient exam protocols.
- ❖ Anyone experiencing MADE should not worry, and instead try three straight-forward solutions.
- ❖ MADE is not an excuse to stop or incorrectly wear masks, which remain essential in the fight against the pandemic.

### STRATEGIC COMPONENTS

- **Frame MADE as a Pandemic-Related Issue Potentially Affecting Any Mask Wearer.** MADE's underlying cause—increased airflow escaping a poorly fitted mask, flowing over the eye, and then more quickly evaporating tear film—was as applicable to a broad spectrum of the population. Targeting mainstream “everyman” story opportunities would drive greater reach.
- **Position MADE as a High Interest Point of Discussion/Care for ECPs.** When MADE began growing, eye care professionals were still in lockdown in many countries, with reduced patient volumes. We offered MADE as a topic to reconnect with nearly all patients—even those who were not coming into the office—helping ECPs remind people of their knowledge, the importance of good eye health (even during a pandemic) and how deeply they cared.
- **Emphasize that MADE Can Be Easily Self-Addressed by Consumers.** Unlike so many COVID-19 scare stories, our tone would offer hope and control to people grasping for anything they could do to make their lives “normal” again. Instead of frightening the population, we would offer very straight-forward guidance on how to overcome MADE themselves.
- **Tap High Reach, High Volume Sources to Vault the Issue to Prominence.** The team would immediately pursue several high reach media sources, i.e., trusted outlets where a well-told story would rapidly accelerate interest from other news organizations.
- **Show and Tell.** While the lack of budget did not allow for any design assistance, illustrating the MADE story visually would still be essential, requiring creativity and DIY while maintaining CORE's brand standards.
- **Extend the Story.** Conditioned on a strong 2020 outcomes, 2021 efforts would selectively pulse the storyline to keep visibility high.

## BUDGET

All efforts were performed as a fraction of CORE's already small annual services agreement with the agency, which needed to account for multiple scientific and organizational announcements each year. There were no external expenditures for the MADE program.

## EXECUTION

- **Spark Initial Interest through *The Conversation*.** Available only to university-affiliated authors, *The Conversation* is a non-profit news organization whose stories are regularly carried in full by other outlets and which typically spark similar topic coverage from mainstream media. We proposed breaking the MADE story as CORE bylined feature, and *The Conversation's* editors were quick to accept. The resulting story set the entire program on a fast track to success.
- **DIY Infographic and Photography.** With no budget for design, a CORE scientist converted the MADE patient tips into a streamlined infographic using no-cost online tools, while another scientist photographed his wife in before/after settings to illustrate good mask wear. These accompanied all outbound communications to reinforce clinical and consumer guidance.
- **Ophthalmic Media Outreach.** The team worked with journalists at optometric and ophthalmological publications in the Americas, Europe and Asia-Pacific to gain coverage in two waves. The first was focused on alerting ECPs that MADE would soon be on the minds of their patients given pending consumer media interest and arming them with the tips for good care. The second focused on the infographic being translated (see below) and placed on CORE's COVIDeyefacts.org, expanding the story to non-English markets.
- **Consumer Media Follow-Up as Interest Grew.** The Conversation spark worked as intended. Within 24 hours of it going live, CORE was fielding requests for comment about MADE from the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, Spain and other countries. This upward spiral of news creation drove dozens of print and broadcast interviews over several weeks, which also acted as another catalyst for professional eye health media to continue paying attention to the topic and CORE's leadership.
- **Translations with Industry Partners.** Seeing the current and potential impact of the MADE program, Alcon—a major eyecare industry manufacturer—approached CORE to discuss potential translations. After establishing terms to provide Alcon with brand recognition while not diminishing CORE's independence, the company converted the infographic into 31 additional languages.
- **Social Media Content.** CORE's own social channels are focused on the professional community, and the in-house team used the infographic, photo and steady stream of news stories to keep ECPs digitally informed. To reach consumers, CORE encouraged full use of its MADE assets from corporations (e.g., dry eye/pharmaceuticals and contact lens manufacturers), industry associations, and especially ECPs for direct outreach to their patients through their own digital platforms.
- **Direct Outreach to Current and Potential Sponsors.** The CORE team wrote to industry sponsors to make them aware of the MADE initiative and significant news coverage milestones, burnishing the organization's reputation of serving as a trusted expert for global media and ECPs. Beyond cementing relationships with current sponsors (some of whose research programs were paused because of lockdowns), this action also allowed CORE to make more inroads with established and emerging companies in the dry eye sector.
- **2021 Story Pulsing.** As masking continued into 2021, the team identified other CORE-involved initiatives into which MADE messaging could be inserted. In addition, it pre-targeted Fall/Winter 2021 to reiterate the story as part of a holistic perspective on COVID-19's influence on dry eye; a follow-up byline pitch to *The Conversation* was accepted and set off another round of coverage.

## RESULTS

Within the first month of execution, the program had exceeded all 2020 objectives, setting the pace to achieve 2021 objectives as well.

- ✓ **Created acknowledgement and understanding of MADE (Mask-Associated Dry Eye) among global eye care professionals.**
  - 2020: Earned 41 stories from A-tier ophthalmic sources (target: 15 stories). 2021: 46 stories (expanding into ophthalmology)
  - Gained industry coverage in >20 countries (target: 6 countries).
  - Documented use of MADE assets and terminology by hundreds of ECP offices/retailers in at least 12 countries.
  - >20 medical peer review and professional papers to date have now cited MADE.
- ✓ **Developed awareness of MADE among the general population.**
  - 2020: Gained >1.69 billion mainstream media impressions (target: 50 million) from >700 sources on six continents.
  - 2021: Achieved an *additional* 1.73 billion impressions (target: 50 million) from >1,800 sources on six continents.
  - Included prominent stories from *The Washington Post*, *The Mirror* (UK), *Yahoo! News*, *Parade*, Cox News broadcast affiliates, *CTV*, *Global*, *Health.com*, *Shape*, *Martha Stewart*, and *McClatchy* (e.g., *Seattle Times*). Helped drive 5.45MM social reach.
  - The *Conversation* stories alone amassed >100,000 direct readers on the academic news organization's main site, with millions more through Creative Commons-licensed placements.
  - Perhaps most tellingly, the front-loaded MADE effort catapulted discussion surrounding dry eyes and mask wear into popular culture, with many second year stories, social conversations, and medical professional outreach occurring organically based on the initial CORE seeding (aided by boosts from the 2021 pulsing approach).
- ✓ **Generated new project/program opportunities for CORE among current and potential industry sponsors.**
  - Received nine expressions of interest in projects from potential manufacturers and collaborators (target: 3).
  - Expanded CORE's visibility beyond optometric manufacturers to also include inquiries sectors such as mask designers.