RIME. Cancer. Child abuse. Cocaine. Causes competing for the attention of the American public are proliferating. And, fortunately for public relations professionals charged with getting out a nonprofit organization's message, so are the number of ad agencies donating their time for public service campaigns.

The quality of print PSAs are getting better, say ad industry observers and public relations professionals working with agencies to develop and execute their group's campaigns. Many say this improvement stems in large part from the increasing number of agencies itching to do this work and from the higher level of executive involvement that is being put on the accounts. The benefits: more clever writing, more sophisticated graphics, more creative PSAs.

Larger agencies have always been more interested in public service work. It makes employees feel good about their work, and they are more likely to be chosen if they are more productive. But creative directors say, it's a trade-off because the cost of creating an emotional ad is higher. And it's partly because they've discovered that public service work is more than just a good cause. It can be good for business.

In 1984, a PSA, "Drinking and driving can kill a friendship," won its creator Leber Katz Partners - then a medium-sized agency, now part of Foote, Cone & Belding - the ad industry's prestigious Clio award for best ad. Not for best PSA; for best overall ad. The black and white ad featured a striking image of two friends shaking hands - one flesh and blood, the other a skeleton. A running list of "famous last words from friends to friends," including "Are you jailing? - I feel great," appears in ghostly white type behind the image. The recognition and acclaim LKP got from the award was staggering.

(Advertising groups note that the number of PSAs entered in awards competitions has increased dramatically since then.)

Part of this newfound awareness of what PSAs can do for ad agencies has led to more seasoned professionals putting their time into them. "It used to be that PSAs were more bush-league," says Dan Forte, exhibition staff member of the Art Directors Club. "The senior people were busy making money in the past," adds Ralph Gillette, director of creative services at DDB Needham in Chicago, who works on the American Cancer Society's PSAs, among others, says that PSAs can be hard on the heart because of the sense of responsibility they bring with them. "If I don't sell a lot of cake mix, it's not the end of the world." But if someone doesn't go for mammogram, she says, it could be fatal. PSAs are also difficult, says Vitro, because the standards are higher. "In the past few years, such great PSAs have been done that creating new ones is more difficult. They can't be good anymore, they have to be great."

Some, however, say PSAs haven't come easy. "Overall, print PSAs were probably a step behind paid ads in the past," says Virginia P's. APR, director of media coordination at the American Red Cross, though she claims the quality is not always true of her agency's (J. Walter Thompson) executions. Allen Rosenshine, president and CEO of Omnicon, agrees. "As a viewer, my net impression is that in the past, print PSAs have not been as good as paid ads," he says. "But PSAs cannot be a second-rate effort without losing credibility. As with any communication, a cheap look has a negative effect on an audience."

Ad agencies' efforts to get public service assignments is good news to public relations professionals at nonprofits. "The work we do is so much more than our budget would allow, because of volunteers," says Larry Boersma, director of development and community relations for the San Diego Humane Society. In Boersma's case, the volunteer came in the form of Vitro, who donated his time outside of work to a Humane Society campaign. The award-winning, five-ad campaign cost the Humane Society about $300, says Boersma, for film processing. Everything else was donated. Of course, large-scale campaigns can be expensive. Even with the agency giving its time and the media's space, production, duplication and mailing costs for print ads for its four separate campaigns (on blood donation, volunteer recruitment, and AIDS) will cost the Red Cross $60,000 this year.

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Meryl Davids

Price, senior vice president of Campbell and Wagman in Los Angeles. Now, he says, they see that other agencies have been put in the limeight through great PSAs, so they too want to make great PSAs.

But it's not just agency kings who are clamoring for more pro bono business. "Art directors and writers sell pizza, home loans, and industrial lubricants all day long," says John Vitro, art director at Chat/Day in Los Angeles. PSAs, he says, offer a chance to leave the world of rational persuasion and enter the emotional emotional arena where they can flex their creative muscle, and flex it on issues they feel strongly about. People want to make a difference, says Price, especially people who came of age in the socially oriented sixties. People who often know firsthand the problems of the eighties. He feels that many in the ad business have experiences with drugs, crime, drunk driving, and other issues they want to do something about. "My son went astray with drugs," says Price, "which is part of the reason I want to help others with it." And he has another theory for ad people's increasing involvement: "In the sixties, paid advertising was filled with beautiful creative work. But times have changed. Clients are more demanding, money is tighter. Maybe the only outlet for truly creative advertising now is in public service."

Most creative directors relish the opportunity to work on these emotional subjects. Some say it's what makes PSAs easy to do, but also what makes them hard. Susan Gillette, director of creative services at
PORTFOLIO

HANDLE WITH CARE:

MediaWise: Less copy and a larger, partial image is the name of the game in outdoor advertising, says Jack Donahue, vice president of public relations at the Institute for Outdoor Advertising. But since the creative heyday of the sixties, he says, art directors had forgotten how to make a dramatic impact with outdoor ads. Until 1984 and Nike, that is. "Nike exploited the bigness of the medium and gave the ad a feeling of movement," Donahue says. Its ads, featuring athletes in motion, no copy, and a small Nike logo, proved very successful, and perked up the interest of creative directors at agencies nationwide. One of this year's OBIE award winners (the Oscars of the outdoor industry), a forest-fire prevention ad (top left), combines a large box of the dangerous matches, a closely cropped image of Smokey—

guardian of the forest—and a warning message. "It's very simple, but it has all the ingredients," says Ralph Price, former deputy creative director at Los Angeles's Foote Cone & Belding, where the ad was created. "The message gets through quickly, necessary in a medium where people have about four seconds before they drive by."

At the Georgia Council for the Arts (top right), a campaign to promote the arts in the state featured just the head and arm of a violist. The billboard was done entirely in black and white, says creative director Les Parker, of Atlanta's Tucker Wayne & Company, who worked on the campaign, because it provided both an elegant and a distinctive look—most boards are done in color. And, he says, the decreased production costs for the black ad didn't hurt either.

HE'S THE IMAGE OF HIS FATHER:

Heartstrings: When D'Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles chose parents as its target audience for the drug abuse ads sponsored by the ad-industry-wide Media-Advertising Partnership for a Drug-Free America (a campaign to "denormalize" drug use in society), vice president Mark Ezraty decided to capitalize on the idea that parents, by example, turn their kids on to drugs (above left). "Parents who are recreational users of drugs can't tell their kids not to use drugs because drugs kill," Ezraty says, "so we wanted to 'quit' them into stopping, themselves." Seeing a kid actually doing coke is likely to make a parent squeamish, he says. The ad's bold, stacked headline was an attention-getter. "We weren't looking to make a little, petite statement, but rather a boom statement."

THIS SUMMER THOUSANDS OF DOGS WILL DIE BEHIND THE WHEEL.

Tugging at the heartstrings was also the goal of John Vitro, art director of Chiat/Day in Los Angeles, who volunteered his time outside the agency for the San Diego Humane Society. His award-winning campaign (above right) included a journalist-style photo of a dog locked in a hot car, with the strong message that, in summertime, this seemingly innocuous act can be deadly (on a sunny day, the temperature in the car can reach 120°). Larry Boersma, director of development and community relations at the Humane Society, says the PSA helped raise awareness of the problem, and helped the society get a local ordinance passed to outlaw this cruelty to canines. The realistic photo, actually a shot staged with Vitro's own dog, Dexter, "hits people in the guts," Vitro says, as does the bold, clean headline.
More families are moving away from the forest and into new homes.

**Smoking gun:** Fun and friendly Smokey the Bear now has a more hard-hitting image to sell, says Ann King, senior art director at Foote, Cone & Belding, Los Angeles, who has worked on the forest-fire prevention campaign for the last 16 years. It's not just Bambi anymore who's threatened by forest fires, she says. More families are moving into or near wooded areas, so carelessness or arson-set forest fires are dangerous to two-legged creatures too. The new strategy: to enlighten people to the hard-hitting message that forest fires kill people. The execution (above left): "fairly shocking" photography of a family of coffins with a bold headline about the "new homes" of forest dwellers. "This isn't Smokey in the forest among his friends anymore," says Pam Freeman of the Ad Council, which works on the campaign. Above right, a softer approach, in 1983, from the old strategy.

**With a Twist:** The national office of the American Cancer Society liked its Illinois chapter's anti-sun campaign (above) so much it distributed the ads to chapters nationwide. A takeoff on the airline industry's "fly now, pay later," campaigns of a decade ago, the ACS wanted to juxtapose the dangers of tanning with the glamour associated with beautiful women, vacations, and, unfortunately, with sun, says Susan Gillette, director of creative services at Chicago's DDB Needham, who worked on the campaign. The ad, featuring a model shot in Florida by a professional photographer—at cost—puts a twist on the expected, something Gillette likes to do in PSAs. Others she's created: a photo of wholesome food with the caption "Warning: this food may be good for you," and a close-up of the side warning label of a pack of cigarettes with the headline "Blindness causes cancer."
Lighten Up: "Before a few years ago, most of the American Cancer Society ads were based on fear," says Stan Tannenbaum, former chairman of the board of Kempton & Eckhardt advertising and chairman of ACS's Illinois division. "But focus groups showed us people were turned off by negatives." Dismayed by a gory visual in an ad, he says, they mentally tuned the message out. Other nonprofit organizations have also recently come to the same conclusion.

Humorous approaches to serious subjects are used in several PSAs, including last year's Red Cross/Ad Council blood donations campaign (top left). "The ad lets people sit back and laugh at themselves," says Virginia Piel, APR, director of media coordination at the Red Cross. "There is a trend for us to get away from fear and shame, because it can work against you."

Similarly, the Ad Council says, the blood-and-guts approach didn't work for safety belts; people didn't relate to the concept that they could someday be the crushed corpses they saw in the ads. The more humorous "dummy" (bottom), now featured in posters, magazine ads, billboards, TV commercials, and more, makes people aware of the value of safety belts without scaring them off. And the San Diego Humane Society's magazine PSA and fund-raising poster (top right) uses famous four-legged friends to bring home the serious message of dog adoption.
Palette-able: The thought of displaying their handiwork on a 14' x 48' canvas for a captive crowd of 100,000-plus people made some artists in Tucson giddy. And kept submissions to the first annual billboard art competition flooding in. But the contest benefited more than just the three winning artists: the Tucson Artists Coalition got exposure for the concept of corporate-sponsored art in public places; Whiteco

Metrocom, the billboard company that donated the space, got good-guy community exposure, necessary after defending itself during a messy ban-the-billboards campaign (the billboards are staying); and Tucsonians got to see art that they presumably might have seen art-choke ads. One of the three 1986 winners (the 1987 competition is now underway) was Nancy Solomon's "Artist's Eyes Are Speakers" (above).

12 alternatives to whacking your kid.

All talk: Conveying serious information in a straightforward way doesn't have to be boring, says Pam Freeman, manager of public relations for the Ad Council. When the council began work in 1976 to prevent child abuse, people hadn't heard of the problem. "It wasn't in the news or in people's minds," she says, "and it hadn't been the topic of a 'Cagney and Lacey' episode yet." When a Harris poll in the early 1980s showed awareness of the issue over 90 percent, the campaign turned to prevention, and, hence, a need to let people know specific ways to stop the problem. "Twelve alternatives to whacking your kid" (above left), features tips like "munch an apple" and "wash your plants."

The knocked-out headline, bold numbers, and the lines separating each suggestion give the ad its visual appeal.

Similarly, "Should you worry about getting AIDS?" (above right)—one of several public service campaigns supported by the Red Cross—catches the eye with its bold, and provocative, headline. The Q&A format with the questions blocked off and in all caps, says the Red Cross's Virginia Pie, APR, allows people to home in on the questions they're concerned about. The ad and its counterpart—"Should you worry about AIDS in the workplace?"—have been widely picked up since their introduction this spring.
Though more creative PSAs abound, experts caution that creativity is but one piece of a very complicated picture. “I used to think it was a ‘no brainer’ to do good public service ads,” says Rosenshine, who is serving as creative review chairman for the Media-Advertising Partnership for a Drug-Free America, a coalition formed by ad agencies nationwide to create and run hundreds of anti-drug abuse ads in the next few years. “With hunger, or illiteracy, you’re not trying to convince someone that the subject is worthwhile. It’s easy to write gratifying ads. The problem is it’s not so easy to be effective—to motivate, to move behaviors, to get contributions. When you talk somebody into your brand of soap, in the end they have a bar of soap. With public service, in the end they have only the psychic reward.”

Pam Freeman, manager of public relations for the Ad Council, a nonprofit group that conducts PSA campaigns for many national organizations, including the Red Cross and the National Crime Prevention Council, says more groups are now using PSAs. She attributes this increase to local organizations better recognizing the power of advertising, and to all organizations—getting the financial squeeze from Uncle Sam—needing to talk to and raise money from the private sector. PSAs can heighten awareness of an organization, she says, which lubricates the purse clasp when the fund raiser comes a-calling.

Some organizations think PSAs are easy, she says, but like Rosenshine she knows they are not: “To really do a good, effective campaign, you need to do the legwork behind the campaign. You need a lot of research.” When the Ad Council began work on the crime prevention campaign, for example, focus groups were conducted to determine how Americans perceived crime, revealing that people had an unrealistic fear of being victimized. This information helped the council design a campaign that wouldn’t heighten that fear.

“Even with awareness campaigns,” Freeman says, “you usually want people to take some actions as well. What will motivate them to do this? If you have an 800 number—and we always try to include ways for people to get help and information—you need to be able to handle the calls. And you need to monitor public opinion to be sure your approach is working.” Though you get a lot for free, she says, putting together a good public service campaign takes time, money, and very hard work.

Meryl Davids is assistant editor of PRI.

**Questionnaire**

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10. What accounts for this change? (RANK THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT REASONS, with 1 being the most important and 3 being the third most important.)

- [ ] realized the social importance of pro bono work
- [ ] increase/decrease in staff size
- [ ] increase/decrease in organization’s earnings
- [ ] nature of pro bono clients’ needs changed
- [ ] realized pro bono work could help increase business
- [ ] realized pro bono work did not help increase business
- [ ] not able to measure benefits
- [ ] too expensive
- [ ] change in organization’s structure (Please specify.)
- [ ] other (Please specify.)

11a. What types of pro bono issues/clients is your firm or department most often involved in TODAY? (RANK THE FIVE MOST IMPORTANT, with 1 being the most important and 5 being the fifth most important.)

11b. What types of pro bono activities was your firm or department most often involved in FIVE YEARS AGO?

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12. What criteria does your firm or department use to choose a pro bono cause/client? (RANK THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT, with 1 being the most important and 3 being the third most important.)

- [ ] CEO/principal feels strongly about cause/client
- [ ] public relations department head feels strongly about cause/client
- [ ] current client(s) feel strongly about cause/client
- [ ] establish your firm/company identity in new market
- [ ] increase visibility, name recognition, and contacts of your firm/company
- [ ] generate new business
- [ ] cause/client solicited your organization’s help
- [ ] use your firm’s or department’s staff downtime productively
- [ ] other (Please specify.)

13. What type of work does your firm or department do for pro bono clients?

- [ ] community relations
- [ ] public affairs
- [ ] corporate advertising
- [ ] publications
- [ ] corporate communications
- [ ] PSAs
- [ ] counseling
- [ ] publicity
- [ ] crisis communications
- [ ] research
- [ ] employee relations
- [ ] special events
- [ ] investor/financial relations
- [ ] spokesperson training
- [ ] management
- [ ] VNRs
- [ ] media relations
- [ ] other (Please specify.)

14. Are you:  
- [ ] male  
- [ ] female

15. Are you a member of PRSA?  
- [ ] yes  
- [ ] no

16. Are you Accredited?  
- [ ] yes  
- [ ] no

17. What are the first three digits of your ZIP code?

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Please return this Questionnaire to: The Questionnaire, Public Relations Journal, 33 Irving Place, New York, NY 10003. Thank you for your help.