

Getting a message of help across

By Jamie Talan

If you were working back in 1881, how would you get your product's message into the minds of a nation? You might have looked to Clara Barton, but she probably would have declined the offer. She was busy with her own "word of mouth" campaign. And like any good advertising executive of the 1980s, she had friends in high-visibility spots and knew what would entice the public. She was an ad pro.

Realizing the need for immediate personal service to the men in uniform, in 1881 Miss Barton formed the American Assn. of the Red Cross to help her "soldier boys." At the founding meeting, four journalists who were present became the source of what turned into one of the most aggressive advertising campaigns in the history of not-for-profit organizations. The four men went back to their papers and spread the printed word.

More than a century has passed, and the Red Cross still has a knack for cultivating communications personnel. This year marks 25 years that J. Walter Thompson USA has been the volunteer-task agency for the Red Cross. Creative predecessors include Ruthrauff & Ryan, Lennen & Mitchell, Compton, N W Ayer & Sons and SSC&B.



In those early years, Miss Barton publicized the Red Cross through news releases, correspondence and speeches. Knowing that newspaper accounts of disasters never failed to stir public sympathies, her appeals were linked to such "human interest" stories. When ads were written, the same approach

followed. By 1883, more than 300 papers and magazines had had stories about the Red Cross.

Red Cross themes were simple: The idea was a good one, America needed the Red Cross and the Red Cross performed well. When media attention dwindled in peacetime, Miss Barton created a new product, disaster relief, to build upon the philosophy of the Red Cross. It worked. Unfortunately for the Red Cross, Miss Barton left the organization in 1904 to pursue other interests.

Then came World War I, which brought one of the "greatest fund raising campaigns ever," says Ervin Oberschmidt, vp of the Red Cross. "Theater performances and movies were interrupted by war fund appeals. Newspapers and magazines published features and ads. The theme was: Red Cross is a natural expression of the people—give."

This helped give rise to a full-fledged publicity and advertising department in 1917. One of its first projects was to produce 2,000 parades simultaneously across America for the second war fund drive. The Red Cross also distributed free cigarettes to soldiers.

"After the war, advertising dropped, as the ads continued with the same wartime approach," says Mr. Oberschmidt. "From the beginning, the Red Cross policy forbade any use of organization funds to pay for advertising space. The same rules applied when they started using radio and television."

The 1920s brought the first Red Cross radio program, which also helped promote Red Cross awareness. The themes were that "Red Cross is good" and "Every American has an obligation to join." Organization ads appeared in issues of 450 major newspapers, 4,000 small newspapers and 7,000 technical and trade publications. It also helped that Red Cross nurses became a symbol of the great work they were doing at home and overseas. During these years, Americans turned to the Red Cross for public welfare.

The Depression and the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932 brought out the need for a government welfare program. "It brought some bad press for us during those years," says Mr. Oberschmidt, indicating that public service space was harder to come by.

On the other hand, Americans have always recognized the value of wartime Red Cross. In 1940, when America began preparing for what became World War II, the Red Cross created the slogan "At his side," which was used throughout war years. Movie and Broadway stars appeared personally in major cities to promote the Red Cross appeal, and an estimated 82% of all Americans were reached by radio.

In 1943, the Advertising Council, a not-for-profit organization that evolved in response to the war, made the

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Red Cross a beneficiary of "public relations advertising," a concept that was just catching on. The last day in February, 1945, was declared Red Cross Radio Day and a war fund message was sent out an average of 5½ times an hour. The message: "Keep your Red Cross at his side."

Ingrid Bergman's appeal was seen and heard by more than 80 million theater goers; a documentary, "Seeing Him Through," was shown in 15,000 theaters throughout March, and ads were read in more than 16 million Sunday newspapers. The agency of record during the "At his side" campaign was former Ruthrauff & Ryan, but whether it created the slogan is not clear today.



Since early on, Red Cross ads have highlighted the organization's humanitarian tradition.

In 1946, Lennen & Mitchell wrote the campaign theme "It's your Red Cross," and when Compton became the agency handling the account, it changed the theme to "You, too, can help through your Red Cross. Give now!" Next, N W Ayer had a brief stint—one year—and it created a campaign using Arthur Godfrey quoting tragedies of the year.

From 1953 to 1957, SSC&B handled the account, developing the theme lines that were later used in many of Thompson's ads of the 1960s: "Join and serve" and "On the job when it counts."

When the Ad Council designated Thompson as the agency of record in 1957, the Red Cross was having some

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image problems. "People didn't understand the nature of the Red Cross during peacetime," says Wallace O'Brien, president and chief operating officer of Thompson. "Soldiers had come home from WWII angry that they had to pay for coffee and donuts as they fought for our country. They blamed the Red Cross."

Additionally, Mr. O'Brien says, Thompson stepped in during the "worst disaster cycle" in the history of the Red Cross. The slogans changed, but the use of human interest stories did not. Says Mr. O'Brien: "The advertising has leaned mainly on American hardship helped by an aiding Red Cross hand. We used the dark side of the situation to motivate people to give blood, time and money."

As the Red Cross services increased, the advertising campaigns expanded to include the additional "products" offered by the Red Cross. Over the years, ads included volunteers spending time with seniors, the blind learning to swim and deaf women having babies.

"It's an enormous job," says Mark Earle, management supervisor on the Red Cross account in Thompson's New York office. "We continually work on incorporating the entire product line into our advertising."

Thompson has doubled its creative time with a new health promotion campaign. Together, there are now three separate campaigns: Volunteer and fund-raising, blood donations and health promotion.

This year 3,110 staff hours were spent creating the 1982-83 campaign, which was introduced last month in St. Louis during the national Red Cross convention. This year's slogan, "We'll help. Will you?" won out over last year's "Together we can change things" in tests. The blood campaign, developed as a separate campaign in 1978, is still using "Thanks. You've saved my life," which has been effective in drawing donors across the nation. The Red Cross currently delivers half of all the blood in the U.S.

The Ad Council estimates that in 1981 the Red Cross received public service radio, television, magazine, transit and outdoor display space and time valued at more than \$35 million. Thompson passes along only out-of-pocket costs, which last year totaled \$72,378.

"Many production costs are given at either a nominal fee or for no fee at all," says Mr. Earle, the Thompson management supervisor. "Businesses are very generous when it comes to public service work."

Red Cross and Thompson have proved flexible to change, expansion and updating, which is possibly why their relationship has lasted so long. But there have been rough spots. The "Good neighbor" campaign of the 1970s was dropped when a 1976 Harris poll revealed that awareness of services, except for disaster relief, was low. In 1979, Alan Gillies, former Thompson creative director in the New York office, began relying heavily on "personalities" to push editors and broadcasters into airing the messages.

"You're competing for the charity dollar and a signature voice has more of a chance of being aired," says Mr. Gillies, who in one year alone used Lucille Ball, Mike Douglas, Dionne Warwick, Bob Hope and Bill Cosby with the theme campaign "Help keep Red Cross ready."

"The personalities added impact to the campaign," says Mr. Gillies, who is now retired and living in Arizona. "Media placements that year were estimated at over \$40 million."

Yet the Ad Council, which prints and distributes Thompson's ads, finds it difficult to determine how often the ads are used. Eleanor Hanglely, advertising campaign director, says she receives only 15% to 20% of the approximately 22,000 business reply cards the council sends out asking media outlets about their usage of the ads.

A 1981 Harris poll placed advertising awareness of Red Cross at 38%. Says Mr. O'Brien of this figure: "Since we are riding on public service time and not buying prime slots, this is good. We don't have the communications control we have with a paying client."

Whatever the case, these ads may have helped the Red Cross bring the message of its services to the public more effectively. Another Harris poll, one taken this year, has found some of that "low awareness" of Red Cross services found in 1976 had abated. The 1982 poll showed that 39% of the respondents said they were aware of Red Cross services that offer swimming and lifesaving lessons; by 1982, that figure had risen to 46%. For blood collections services, the numbers were 79% in 1976 and 86% in 1982; for first aid, 66% and 79%; for services to the elderly, 25% and 30%, and for medical research, 15% and 27%.

How much of this can be attributed to specific ads is difficult to determine. The Ad Council, which prints and distributes the ads, receives only 15% to 20% of the approximately 22,000 business reply cards it sends out to ask media outlets about their usage of the ads, says Eleanor Hanglely, advertising campaign director.

Has the 25-year relationship been as steady as it seems? Mr. Oberschmidt, the Red Cross vp, says his organization did have a problem with trying to fulfill increasing creative needs. "As we grew, we asked Thompson to grow with us," he says. "We knew we were asking them to take time away from their paying clients or put additional people on the accounts."

But, as with most public service accounts, Thompson staff members like the freedom of preparing sensitive and emotional copy and art. "It's freedom because it's free," says Mr. Earle, adding "that it takes pressure off of creative energy."