

Networks Hit on PSA Loads

FCC's Hundt says he may seek quotas for public-service spots

TELEVISION / By Richard Katz

Federal Communications Commission Chairman Reed Hundt and Ad Council chairman Alex Kroll last week blasted the broadcast networks for cutting the amount of public-service announcements they air. Hundt threatened to enact quotas to ensure that the networks run a certain number of PSAs.

"If PSAs cannot be guaranteed in the traditional ways of the past, what new practices need to be developed that would keep this wonderful medium on the side of all the public-service goals that PSAs have so nobly and successfully served?" Hundt asked in a speech at the National Association of Broadcasters convention in Las Vegas.

In exchange for receiving free digital spectrum space, broadcasters have agreed to commit to public-service initiatives that have yet to be determined. Ruth Wooden, president of the Ad Council, said that Hundt likely will direct networks and stations to air more PSAs to satisfy the public-service requirements.

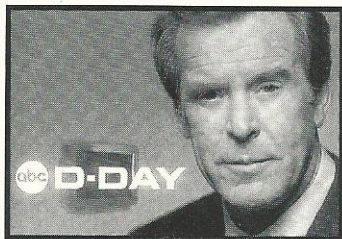
Kroll said at the NAB that the Big Four networks averaged 5.2 seconds of PSAs per prime-time hour in 1995, down from 12 seconds per hour in 1993. Kroll's source is the Television Monitoring Report, prepared by the American

Association of Advertising Agencies and the Association of National Advertisers. The report indicates that PSA time was flat at 5.2 seconds in May 1996 and edged back up to 6.2 seconds in November 1996. Kroll praised the radio and cable industries for their PSA commitments. "Broadcast has been anemic—it's the weak link," said Kroll, chairman emeritus of Young & Rubicam. "Why isn't there a national uprising from people to do something about it?"

All four networks refuted the criticism, but only ABC made an official response. Representatives of the other three networks said they don't want to get into a tit-for-tat with Hundt.

ABC ran an anti-drug PSA campaign in March that featured one spot per hour daily. The spots were worth \$20 million and reached 90 percent of Americans an average of 11 times, said Sherrie Rollins, an ABC representative.

While the Ad Council's Wooden praised ABC's anti-drug effort and the campaigns of the other networks, she noted that the nets often count promotional spots as PSAs. Wooden complimented NBC on its long-running "The More You Know" campaign, but she questioned whether it should count as a PSA because it features NBC stars rather than an independent public-service organization. ■



Newsman Peter Jennings in a recent ABC anti-drug PSA