



10 Commandments of PSAs

by John Paul Kowal

Often, PSAs alienate the audience by instilling guilt, confusion, or leaving a ho-hum impression, but this need not happen if you observe these do's and don'ts!

Radio and television public service announcements (PSAs) too often are the product of a local station's good will and eager personnel from professional service agencies. Personnel from these service agencies may be anyone from an administrative assistant or social worker to a staff director or volunteer. They represent organizations ranging from traditional united fund agencies, nonprofit organizations supporting community activities, groups advocating support for disadvantaged individuals, to organizations seeking establishment of a home for local theater or some other arts activity.

Service agency personnel responsible for PSAs usually lack media experience and understanding. Often organizational tunnel vision has created messages that are important only to that organization and are not interesting, persuasive or informative.

PSAs with ineffective messages violate what I call the Ten Commandments, of Public Service Announcements. While Federal Commission regulations require broadcast stations to operate in the public interest, the moral worth of a message will not compensate for a poor or confusing presentation.

An informal anecdotal, survey of PSA aired on one large media market revealed that they all violated at least two, if not or more, of the following commandments.

- ✓ **Thou Shall not Bore Thine Audience.** Most of the PSAs viewed lacked any dramatic presence, contrary to viewers' normal media expectations.

They used the old “talking head” look-straight-into-the-camera, and blurt-out-your-message techniques. In many cases, viewers have a negative reaction to the poor presentation. Blandness creates a PSA that blends with all other poor PSAs which are dull, indistinguishable, and unimportant to the viewer.

✓ **Thou Shall Not Instill Guilt.** The not-so-subtle scare tactics, well developed by some, typically is an audience turn-off, intended or not. The message is simple: your lack of support will cause a catastrophe. The guilt isn't even implied; it's right up front and glaring. Let the audience try and sleep with that, the producer says.

✓ **Thou Shall Not Be Neglectful.** Neglect is a sin that results in a poor presentation, inadequate on-camera talent, or insufficient organization -- leading to poor quality PSAs that distract and annoy the audience. The producer of these PSAs did not do their homework to determine what types of messages the media airs, how to prepare their messages and how to promote them to the media.

✓ **Thou Shall Not Cause Motion Sickness.** Motion sickness in PSAs is a diseased characterized by jumping from point to point, with no rationale, or connection, creating a message that impossible to understand or follow. Motion sickness reflects poor thought process by it's creators, and leaves the viewer bobbing like an untethered buoy.

✓ **Thou Shall Not Stuff Thy PSA.** Stuffing is the sin of producers who try to present too much, too fast. The thought is that you only have one shot at it, so get it all in -- even if it amounts to the contents of a very long book. A 350-page book can not be compressed into a 30-or 60-second spot. Several years ago the 30-second spot constituted the majority of all TV PSAs aired. That is figure is probably higher today due to the rising cost of TV time. In these short spots the message must be clear and to the point.

✓ **Thou Shall Not Deliver a Counterproductive Message.** A counterproductive message is delivered when an example is used that is far from the norm. The example, while true, poses a false and misleading set of expectations for the audience, because the example is not representative. For example, a recent public service campaign for the employment of the handicapped cited a blind man who had been elected as a justice of the supreme court. Shall all blind citizens be measured by that example? Why not ask blind people what message they want delivered? Here you see the effects of the producer's tunnel vision by using examples that are not directly relevant to the audience, and in this example possibly not even relevant to those served.

✓ **Thou Shall Not Omit Important Information.** This sin is just the opposite of the Fifth Commandment. PSA producers get caught up in the feeding frenzy that accompanies the excitement of being at a TV or radio studio. In the mystification of the production process, they omit portions of their message. Sometimes it is as little as where to go or call if you are interested in the problem.

Often it is that final detail that will enable an interested viewer to act. Without that detail, the desired call-to-action is eliminated. Worse yet, there are some PSAs that leave off the tag line and the audience never finds out what is expected of them.

✓ **Thou Shalt Not Distort Thy Message.** Distortion is the road sign to irrelevancy. It is usually the product of agency tunnel vision or professional concerns, neither of which is of interest or importance to the viewer. The distortion is traceable to the private priorities of the sponsoring agency or organization. One PSA stressed the need for court reform, but the content of the PSA dealt with internal administrative matters, paper traffic, court clerks and other areas of little interest and possibly of little consequence to the public. The spot never tied any of these issues into a major public interest -- the court as an effective vehicle to serve in the administration of justice and the punishment of the guilty.

✓ **Thou Shall Not Cloud Thy Message.** Clouded messages almost always leave the impression, lacking any other clear-cut message, that your hat is in your hand and the non-explicit message is fund raising. Fund raising, in our opinion, is probably the poorest use of a PSA. In these hard times people are not going to give to something that they don't see as important to them. What was your message? Did you really want to solicit funds? Is this the best way? If fund raising was not your message, it's time to start over.

✓ **Thou Shall Not Be Confusing.** PSAs confusion is a sin characterized by no discernible message. The audience is left saying, "What was that all about?" Worse yet, they may say, "So what?" If there was anything there, it didn't come across. Was there anything there?

These Ten Commandments represent simple guideposts that identify problem PSAs. The problems represented in all ten have a common foundation -- they never took the audience into consideration.

The common basis for problem PSAs is a poor thought process on behalf of the producer. Usually, staff numbers are assigned to develop a PSA addition to their regular duties. They are satisfied with PSA when they see themselves, their executive director or chairman on TV. For many, the PSA is an end in itself.

Does this mean that a successful PSA must use computer animation, high-cost graphics, exotic visuals, and specially composed jingles? The answer is no. Effective PSAs are possible using limited resources.

Here are some guidelines for producing PSAs that have a better chance of getting used:

- To be effective a PSA should be short, relevant to the audience, interesting or entertaining, and have goal that can be summarized in one declarative sentence. The relevant message must be actionable, meaning the desired response from the audience must be responsible and within their means.

- To create a successful PSA you must make a commitment to the time necessary for the entire process:
 - Have the creative staff with the talent and training necessary to develop a PSA
 - Identify your intended audience, tailor your message, rehearse for a final product that is smooth, organic and complete, and be graceful, gentle, persuasive, and interesting in your execution.
- Remember, the audience will judge your message by the same critical standards they apply to commercial advertising. In short, your message must be professional.
- To get an idea of how successful your PSA is, find a representative group from the intended audience and screen the PSA for them. Can they tell you what your message is? If so, that's success.