

## EFFECTIVE PUBLIC SERVICE AD CAMPAIGNS

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Q: How do you make a PSA – what are the key parameters to think about and are there any adverse parameters to consider?

A: Rule number one in PSA campaign production is develop a strategic plan to address the entire scope of campaign development, including research, creative strategy, production, distribution and evaluation. PSAs should be made the same way a commercial product is made except the job is much harder because instead of trying to sell more product or increase market share, we are normally trying to affect deeply seated public attitudes and behavior.

And perhaps the single most important – and most often neglected – task that should be completed is pre-campaign research. Campaign planners need to learn all they can about two fundamental factors: the problem or behavior that is being addressed via the campaign; and the demographic and psychographic details of the primary target audience. Until research in these two areas is complete, there should be no attempt to address the executional aspects of the campaign, i.e. message development, because you don't have all the facts on the problem and audience that will be the focus for the campaign. This is perhaps the single biggest mistake that PSA producers make.

Doing your research homework includes, but is not limited to, direct observation and discussions with your target audience, formalized focus groups, mall intercepts, and baseline attitudinal/behavioral research about the audiences you are trying to reach and influence. Also, good PSA planning includes doing some gatekeeper research – particularly among TV community affairs directors – in terms of their issue priorities, need for localization and other factors that could influence ultimate usage of your PSAs. Doing your homework also includes learning what works and what doesn't through empirical research. By researching websites on the subject of PSAs, such as the Public Service Advertising Research Center at <http://psaresearch.com> producers can learn a lot about effectiveness on someone else's dime.

Rule two would be to hire experienced producers. Producing a PSA campaign is unlike any other production assignment. It is a specialized craft, and because the producer will not be in control of the message timing and placement, there are unique skills required to develop PSA messages that have impact.

The third thing to think about when producing a PSA is it should have a broad scope. A TV spot is not a campaign, nor is a print ad; they are executions. To produce a "campaign," you must target all media – TV, (including cable), radio and print – at a minimum, because each medium has different strengths and weaknesses in terms of reaching your primary audience. Also, by using a multi-media approach, you increase the chances of reinforcing your message via different approaches in different media.

Finally, when producing your PSA, adopt a team approach by bringing all the people who will be involved in the campaign to the table in the planning stage. This doesn't mean writing copy by committee, which normally results in disaster. It means that those who will be involved in various executional aspects of the campaign understand the objectives, audiences, timing, distribution and measurement details of the effort. It is foolhardy, for example, for the creative people not to understand evaluation factors for PSAs – what spot lengths the media find most useful, what topics are being aired, what time of the year is best to distribute. Developing a PSA campaign in a void, without all the advice and strategies of the key players, is a formula for failure.

As for adverse parameters, most of these are addressed under the 10 things to avoid when producing a PSA, but there are a few generalities.

The first of these is to avoid controversy like the plague, particularly in television. Subjects that come to mind are gun control, abortion, religious dogma and using scare tactics in creative executions. Television stations spend millions of dollars to develop a franchise with their viewers based largely on trust, credibility and service. They are not about to risk that franchise by airing PSAs that will flood their switchboards with complaints from viewers. This is not to say that PSAs must be benign; you can still address important, topical issues, but you must use caution and lean towards conservatism in your approach. The best way to insure that your PSA will pass muster with local TV affiliates, is to submit concept storyboards to the “big four” networks in New York. If they reject your PSA, you can bet it will also meet with skepticism in the spot markets.

Choosing a celebrity for your campaign also has its pros and cons. The good news is that the public typically reacts very favorably to celebrity spokespersons, but that can be the bad news as well. Research shows that when using celebrities in PSAs, many people remember the celebrity and forget the message. Also, if the celebrity is currently airing on a particular TV network show, competing networks, and their affiliates will normally not use the PSAs, for obvious reasons. Using a celebrity spokesperson can have ethical or moral negatives. For example, how would you like to have spent your valuable production resources on a TV PSA featuring Robert Downey, Jr. just before he was arrested for drug abuse? How would you feel about Kobe Bryant as your who spokesperson given his current legal problems? Most experts agree that if you are going to use a celebrity, that person should be involved or affected by the issue that you are promoting.

Finally - and there is often a fine line that needs to be addressed here - it is important to avoid “scare tactics” in PSA development. What is “scary” or “gruesome” to one person may be completely different to another. However, the point is the media gatekeepers will, to a large extent, define that for you. If, for example, you develop a TV PSA that shows very explicit scenes of a highway crash, or a person who has had extensive facial surgery due to skin cancer, you may have passed the focus group test, but lost the media battle for airtime because the public service director feels it is too explicit or controversial and will turn off their viewers.

**Q: What Makes a Great PSA?**

While “great” is one of the most overused adjectives in the English language, subject to interpretation by a variety of “experts,” there are certain qualities that make a “very good” PSA that most of us would agree on. To be effective, broadcast PSAs should be relevant to their audience, interesting or entertaining and leave the audience with a message that can be summarized in a single declarative sentence. Most importantly, the message should be actionable, meaning we evoke the desired response from the audience, **AND THERE SHOULD BE A RESPONSE REQUIRED**. Good PSAs move the audience or viewer along in a continuum that ultimately results in attitude or behavior change (though not due to PSAs of and by themselves).

Many very good PSAs are empathetic, meaning they build trust with their audience, or a sense of caring about a problem. Many outstanding PSAs are simple in their execution, mostly photos in a print ad or white type reversed out of a black screen for TV. They need not be expensive, but they do need a tremendous amount of thought and research. Good PSAs are executable in all media and they use the same theme or graphic approaches in all media. Good PSAs provide a buy-in for the media – a method for the media to “get credit” for airing the PSA or running the ad. Good TV PSAs use the strengths of TV to their advantage – full use of color, motion and sound – to register their message. Good radio is good TV without the pictures...evoking a mental picture of the subject through the use of sound effects and a strong, credible spokesperson. Good print is great photography or art, few words and outstanding design – the same kind of creative used in the best magazines that adorn our coffeetables.

And finally, good PSAs recognize that one size does not fit all media outlets; PSAs must be tailored to TV, radio and print, using the inherent strengths that each medium provides in the overall mix.

Q: What Makes a Bad PSA?

Bad PSAs are those that reflect poor planning and execution. Publicizing an issue that is not important, a subject that is irrelevant to mainstream Americans or an issue that is too controversial for the media to use. Bad PSAs are those with a self-serving message; they benefit the non-profit, but few others, and least of all the media who are providing the time and space pro-bono. Bad PSAs are those that are poorly designed and produced; those that fail to take each medium's unique needs into consideration.

Bad PSAs come in one size for everyone such as sending a ¾ inch video tape to all stations because they are cheaper to replicate. Bad PSAs try to get too much message into too little space and time. "We need to cure the world today and these facts are going to do it." Bad PSAs fail to recognize that PSAs are not going to change the world; they are but a single arrow in a quiver full of communications tools.

Bad PSAs are distributed without a plan or a clue in terms of the audience we are trying to reach and what media we are targeting with our message. "There is money in our budget to do a PSA, and we are going to get one out this quarter. - We have only enough for a radio spot, so that's what we'll produce," usually results in a bad PSA, or certainly a bad PSA "program."

Bad PSAs result from hiring inexperienced producers and ad agencies that don't have a clue as to how to produce a PSA, or those who don't understand that attitude and behavior change are not going to occur in the near term. Not only do these "experts" not know about PSAs, they won't admit that they don't know what they don't know. They produce PSAs just like they produce award-winning product commercials and expect them to work the same way. They don't, and since they probably don't evaluate campaign impact either, no one ever knows.

Q: How Effective Can a PSA Be?

"Effective," like the word "great," means different things to different people. To us, as distributors and evaluators, effective means: do they offer a reasonable cost/benefit payback, or return on investment. And, do they accomplish their objective, in terms of public action. The latter assumes that this was one of the campaign goals in the first place, which is not always the case. But it should be.

In terms of audience payback, the Advertising Council claims that its "Take a Bite Out of Crime" (McGruff the Crime Dog) campaign has generated \$128 million in media exposure. While we are not privy to the production cost for this effort, one can rest assured it is a small fraction of the value generated, so it is certainly very effective from this vantage point. Our client campaigns, on average generate \$2 to \$4 million in multi-media support, and we have had some very successful campaigns that generated in excess of \$10 million for a comparatively modest production cost. Even in today's highly competitive PSA environment, our typical TV PSAs generate in excess of \$2 million when tracked for 26 to 52 weeks via the A.C. Nielsen SIGMA tracking system.

The second way to define "effective," is by measuring public reaction, and here the data is harder to come by because many PSAs have no call to action or if they have one, the producers do not tally responses. However, there is some evidence that PSAs can be highly effective in getting the public to take specific action as a result of PSA exposure.

A teen alcoholism PSA campaign, for example, drew more than 76,000 calls to an 800 number that provided information on local referral centers. According to a study on those who called the "hope" line, 62 percent of callers took further action, including confronting a problem drinker.

More than 30,000 of the callers were referred to local treatment centers or to state substance abuse agencies.

In another case study of PSA effectiveness, an American Red Cross campaign “Play Your Part,” recruited 30,000 volunteers in one month, 14,000 of whom were from the 18-34 year old target audience.

Research on the impact of PSAs and colon cancer conducted American Cancer Society, the Advertising Research Foundation and the Ad Council, indicates that PSAs can induce significant behavior changes in public behavior. According to the evaluation report on the campaign, the number of viewers who saw the TV PSAs and indicated they spoke to their doctors about colon cancer increased by 43 percent (71.4% of men). According to the research, an estimated 2.7 million more men were influenced to consult their physicians as a result of the campaign.

There is also considerable research on the impact of broadcast PSAs in terms of its ability to generate phone calls and generally these research studies indicate that PSAs result in generating phone calls than other communications techniques such as pamphlets, POP displays, editorial articles, etc.