

PSAs

the Olympics of Nonprofit Advertising

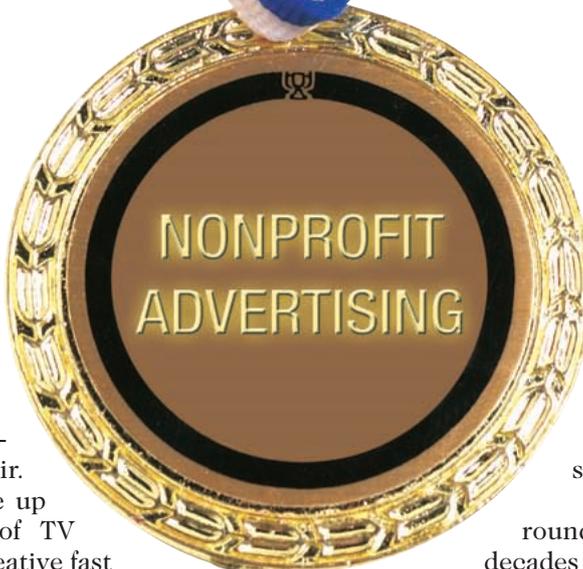
Shine a broad new light on your organization's message with a PSA.

By Chuck Husak

Public service announcements (PSAs) are an important way to get critical messages out and issue-awareness up. PSAs, strategically created and distributed, can help achieve your marketing goals in a cost-effective manner while netting millions of comparable advertising dollars in free space and air. Public service campaigns make up the most powerful category of TV advertising there is. This is a creative fast track — the Olympics of advertising.

Once you've decided to go forward with a PSA, how do you write and produce a great spot? Here's a short list of things to do — and mistakes to avoid:

1. Be sure your PSA message is well-conceived. Don't use your PSA to tell the world about your own good achievements with hopes of receiving donations. Network PSA rules prohibit asking for money. A PSA is a message for the public good, not a commercial for your organization.



2. Use your PSA to turn on a new light. So many PSAs deal with issues people are already aware of. Most folks already know what's bad for them, how to stay safe, and so on. To take your message into their realm of awareness, you need to help them see your issue in a light they haven't seen before.

A perfect example is the recent round of anti-tobacco PSAs. After decades of telling kids that cigarettes are bad for them — showing black lung X-rays, patients on respirators, and other shocking visuals — the new coalition realized that kids weren't very dissuaded by this approach. Indeed, taking a health risk was actually part of the bravado of teen smoking. Instead, the new PSAs took the approach of telling kids that when they smoke, they're playing right into the hands of devious tobacco company executives. Now, instead of being brave renegades by smoking, kids are

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Millions of Americans expose themselves to noise levels above 85 decibels for hours at a time – the level audiologists identify as the danger zone. Lawn mowers, sporting events, live or recorded music, power tools, even traffic and crowded restaurants can sustain these levels. If you're around noises like these for prolonged periods, you're risking permanent hearing loss. For more on the 85 dB threshold, and ways to protect your hearing health, visit ASHA.org.

KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR EARS

AMERICAN SPEECH-LANGUAGE HEARING ASSOCIATION

What Makes a Good PSA Message?

PSAs need to provide information that's intrinsically useful to their audiences. For example:

“Protect your ears from loud noises” was a public service message from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. This campaign was intended to assert the association's role and relevance, yet the actual content of the TV spot, in order to pass network clearance as a bona fide PSA, needed to provide consumer tips on how to protect one's hearing health. This nationwide public service campaign educated Americans about safe sound levels.

“Make sure your kids get enough exercise so their bones develop to full strength later in life” was a public service message from the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS). The purpose of this campaign was to position orthopaedic surgeons as the “go-to” physicians with skills that can keep people enjoying their highest quality of life. Yet, in order to qualify as a PSA and get on the air, this message couldn't just be the AAOS talking about itself. It needed to contain helpful information viewers could use to maintain bone health. In view of the fact that only one in four American schoolchildren gets an adequate amount of physical activity each day, one recent AAOS multimedia public service campaign encouraged parents to urge their kids to be more active. Another AAOS public service campaign targeted improved playground safety for children.

For more examples of PSA campaigns, visit www.alhadv.com.

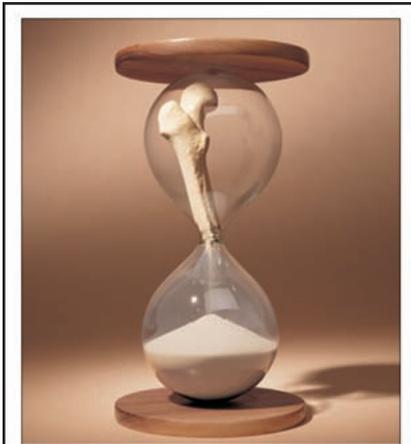
chumps who get manipulated by a marketing strategy. This profound and insightful adjustment is the kind of new light that moves minds.

3. Craft a message that can make a difference to the “average Joe” watching TV. Too many nonprofits create PSAs that could resonate only with their own donors. Sure, every PSA should make its own organization feel proud. But there's a reason they're called public service announcements. The general public needs to take away something useful. “Inside” messages don't pass muster.

4. Don't limit the size and length of your PSAs. There's a mistaken perception that TV stations only use shorter PSAs. According to Goodwill Communications, a leading distribution company for public service campaigns, “Longer spots not only are worth considerably more in airtime, they also permit the communication of a longer message. This is particularly important if there is a call to action on the tag such as a toll-free phone number or Web site address because people need time to record the information in the spot. Our surveys show that just under 60% of all PSAs are 60-second lengths.”

5. Let people know what you want them to do after seeing your spot. Do you want them to volunteer for something? Change their personal habits? Many PSAs simply call attention to a dilemma — as if the viewing public doesn't have enough dilemmas to worry about. The usual wrap up — “For more information, go to reachout.com” — supposes that folks will suddenly be moved to go do

research about your cause and then become one of your champions. If you want people to go to your Web site “to find out more,” it had better be about something they can connect with instantly. People with moles that are changing color, for instance, will take a moment to go to a Web site about the warning signs of skin cancer. But without this strong vested interest, not many people will flock to their computers simply “for more information.”



Will your bones live as long as you do?

Osteoporosis threatens 28 million American men and women, causing their bones to deteriorate and weaken. The scary part is, the disease can develop unnoticed over many years — so the time to prevent it is now. Include an abundance of calcium and vitamin D in your diet. Avoid smoking and excessive alcohol use. And perform weight-bearing exercises like walking, jogging or dancing, everyday. To learn more, call 1-800-524-8086, visit www.aos.org, or visit www.aos.org.

American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons
We keep you well connected.

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6. Package your PSA to maximize usage by program directors at TV and radio stations. Getting these professionals to open your package and view your spots is the “entrance exam” for getting PSA spots on the air. To garner your fair share of exposure, you need to be flexible with your agenda and wrap it inside a generic message that has immediate appeal.

7. Make sure the people who have the authority to say “yes” are in key project meetings and at the actual shoot. You’ll only torture yourself if “approved” concepts and other decisions still need to get trotted down the hall to someone

who parachutes into the process at the eleventh hour. Nothing good ever happens this way. Be sure your approval process is well defined. Who’s designated to approve the scripts, rough cuts, and so on? This problem isn’t just confined to PSA ads, but can be especially troubling with PSAs because nonprofits often have many constituents who want to be involved. Summing this up succinctly: PSAs don’t get better as the committee to approve them gets bigger.

If you follow these tips, simply signing your spot “a public service message from XYZ.com” will garner enough attention to raise awareness for your issue and make your

organization more famous and more appreciated — by the general public, and by your current supporters. ■

Resources

McGowan, Andrew, “PSAs — Free But Not Easy,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 3.

Ott, Christine, “Nonprofit Communications on a Shoestring: Thriving in the Midst of Crisis,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 2.

Public Relations & Communications category in CD-ROM.

“Top 10 Keys to Effective Communication,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 4.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

Chuck Husak is creative director and a principal in the firm of August, Lang & Husak, a marketing and corporate communications agency in Bethesda, Maryland. Mr. Husak has authored PSA campaigns for numerous organizations, netting millions of dollars in comparable advertising value for clients.

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