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Reaching out without talking down

Craig McGuire - 12 Dec 2005 00:00

A growing crisis in children's health is driving a crop of PSAs targeting this crowd. Craig McGuire discovers how to walk the line between powerful and patronizing

From measures to reduce childhood obesity and diabetes, to messages teaching kids the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse, many organizations are trying to reach kids through public service announcements. Fortunately for them, such PSAs, if done well, are especially attractive to media outlets looking to tug on the heartstrings of their audiences.

In today's crowded market, setting these PSAs apart means PR pros need to appeal to both children and their parents.

Today, 70% of the campaigns launched by the Ad Council address issues that affect children, from asthma and childhood cancer, to abuse prevention, breast-feeding sensitivity, underage drinking, and more.

Childhood obesity, in particular, is a topical subject for the Ad Council. The number of overweight children in the US has tripled over the past 30 years, and these kids face problems with diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and arthritis.

In devising its new childhood obesity work in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services, the Ad Council found that what motivated kids most to eat healthy food was to be able to do the things they love to do - only better.

Therefore, the PSAs - under the tagline "Can Your Food Do That?" - stress the personal benefits to the child, such as running faster and playing soccer better, as opposed to the long-term nutritional advantages of healthy eating.

"Kids live in the here and now, and our advertising must relate to that mindset," says Priscilla Natkins, the Ad Council's EVP.

"In all of the ads we develop with our agencies, we are vigilant about making sure that the creative doesn't lecture kids, [but rather that it] speaks to them in their own language," she adds. "And when we identify a benefit around a specific issue, we make sure it is real, tangible, and motivating to kids."

Bart Cleveland, creative director for McKee Wallwork Cleveland, recently worked on a project for the Partnership for a Drug-Free America to warn adolescents about the dangers of sniffing chemicals to get high.

"We began by talking to adolescents in their tone of voice: sarcasm," Cleveland says. "The ads ran on comic-book back covers. The way we delivered the message was a dark abstraction of what sniffing did to their body."

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To be successful, Cleveland emphasizes the need to resonate not only with children, but adults and influencers.

Because of the often-sensitive subject matter associated with such PSAs, it's vital to set clear parameters with clients. For this particular one, that meant there would be no actual demonstrations of how kids sniff, just information on effects and dangers.

"Talk to them with relevance to their feelings and objectivity," Cleveland says. "Sincerity and honesty must come through, but also respect their intelligence."

And frightening children is not always the best way to go. "Early PSAs used scare tactics that did not truly connect with kids," he adds. "They were memorable, but not really applicable to a kid. Today's ads are more focused on talking to kids where they live, giving the kids credit for having a brain."

Capstrat, a PR firm in Raleigh, NC, developed the award-winning PSA campaign for TRU (Tobacco Reality Unfiltered), North Carolina's teen tobacco prevention initiative. "Our strategy was to find out from the target audience what moves them and then build the message in that direction," says Todd Coats, Capstrat's creative director. This can be achieved through focus groups and other types of research and legwork.

"Don't just tell; show," says Billy Warden, the account director who launched TRU. "If a young person [talks] of losing her mom because of smoking, we must see the mother, preferably in both a warm snapshot when she was in her prime and in the awful last days of her cancer."

Warden adds that in terms of influencing kids, nothing is more powerful than a mom or dad who's no longer there because of a certain behavior. At the same time, it's critical to avoid being preachy and condescending to a younger audience.

"Kids get this style so often at home, at church, at school, that they lose the message," Warden says. "It turns into the 'waw waw' background noise of one of the parents in Peanuts."

There is a flip side to this, adds Warden. "I'm sure some cultural observers would argue that kids are increasingly the target of PSAs because dads and moms are creating a vacuum by doing less traditional parenting," he says. "If that's the case, then you don't want to soft-pedal your message. You want to deliver it with power and conviction because you may be the last line of defense."

From his perspective as president of broadcast company MultiVu, Tim Bahr notices that not only are PSAs generally in higher demand, but also, "across all media, childhood health issues are always very well received."

He adds, "The most successful PSAs grab you with a celebrity or visual treatment and hold you long enough to be affected by a message and prompt you to act."

Using a star in such a PSA can be effective in commanding that attention, but preferably only if they have some direct link to the cause. Without that legitimacy, Bahr warns, producers may not be as receptive.

"Clients sometimes mistakenly think that the celebrity route is the best way to go, when it may not be," he says. "There are alternatives that work especially well, such as animation."

Lastly, there is the possibility of extending your PSA - what MultiVu calls "broadcast and beyond" - and covering everything from the internet to wireless technologies. In the past, the largest expenditure wasn't producing the PSA, but distributing information after sparking interest.

"Today, you can embed the video, provide electronic versions of brochures, really offer everything the client wants the consumer to contact, and with no distribution costs," Bahr says. "From producing and distributing to engaging the audience and getting them relevant information, the PSA loop is closed."

Technique tips

- Do** target both kids and adults, and identify the appropriate influencers
- Do** focus on personal benefits to kids, as opposed to long-term advantages
- Do** look at alternate approaches, such as the use of animation
- Don't** use a celebrity unless that person has a direct link to the cause being promoted
- Don't** come off as if your PSA is lecturing or preaching to children
- Don't** forget to leverage the internet for distributing information and extending your PSA

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