



PR TECHNIQUE: PSAs - How to pitch your cause. To succeed in the world of cause-related marketing, your public service announcements must be provocative, well-produced and comprehensively pitched. Craig McGuire reports

Written by **CRAIG MCGUIRE**
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Last year, television and radio stations across the country were flooded with more than 1,000 public service announcements. And while your PSA may represent the most socially redeeming cause in the mix, have you done it justice?

Last year, television and radio stations across the country were flooded with more than 1,000 public service announcements. And while your PSA may represent the most socially redeeming cause in the mix, have you done it justice?

'Before the celebrity spokesperson, before the quality production and even before the high-powered media campaign, you need a simple, compelling message,' says Priscilla Natkins, EVP of campaigns for the Ad Council.

'Be single-minded and focused - and your message has to be actionable.'

'Friends don't let friends drive drunk' is one of the Ad Council's more dramatic and effective PSAs currently running. It is effective not only because it's a provocative production representing a worthwhile cause, but also because it was developed and marketed based on proven techniques.

Initially, you'll want to conduct market research and hold focus groups to gauge how to best affect a national audience. Also, make sure you create multiple spots of varying length - 10, 30 and 60 seconds - to help meet slot requirements. And don't cut corners in production; station managers expect professional quality.

Production costs start at around dollars 10,000 (for a bare-bones spot) and escalate quickly depending on the elements you add, such as a celebrity spokesperson. If you do reach for a star, make sure you tap one that enhances the cause.

'If the talent has a personal reason for representing an issue, they can connect better to the group being addressed,' explains News Broadcast Network's Laura Pair.

'For instance, John Stamos was appropriate for the AHEPA Cooley's Anemia Foundation because of his Greek descent,' Pair says. Cooley's Anemia primarily affects those of Mediterranean heritage.

With such intense competition for airtime, recruiting a celebrity can also be a great way to help ensure coverage. But if you can't afford a big-name star, production value can give you an edge.

'You have to think of it as if you're producing a great commercial,' says Brian Unger, marketing director at TVN Communications Group. 'You are asking a top station to put this spot between two professionally made commercials, so it better look great.'

Once you've created the spot, develop a PSA package that includes storyboards and local data explaining why the issue is important and how it applies to the station's audience. This will help make a station director's decision to run the spot much easier.

Sending a release or storyboard alone is not particularly effective.

Use the Internet to make all of your information available online, and support it with collateral research. This saves money and enhances outreach efforts.

The Ad Council, like many other production and distribution companies involved in the PSA process, has taken to the Internet to archive material that has been pitched to station directors. This provides them with reference material that's easy to navigate.

A study from the American Association of Advertising Agencies and the Association of National Advertisers found that PSAs are being used more than ever during prime time network television. But don't take the current climate for granted. Timing is everything.

Issues that are hot today may be stale next week. Remember, PSAs can take weeks or even months to complete, so you can't assume your spot will be the most topical when it's ready for release.

For example, the Alliance to Save Energy launched its first public service campaign in 1998, well before the buzz on energy deregulation blipped onto consumers' radar. Energy prices were low, and people just weren't all that interested. Additionally, the Alliance was competing with spots backed by MADD as well as a multimillion government drug campaign. The economy was booming and the market was soaring. Translation: rocketing ad rates and less PSA slots.

Despite these factors, the Alliance developed a creative spot - bolstered by an extensive media outreach effort - that earned more than 31,000 placements, according to Rozanne Weissman, director of communications and marketing for the Alliance. The PSA was complemented by the common-sense material illustrated in a collateral document developed simultaneously, entitled 'Powerdollars mart.' The document included tips on saving money and energy.

As the Alliance example shows, media outreach is key, so start mounting a campaign to garner attention for your PSA by compiling an extensive list of all appropriate outlets, including the contact person. The sooner this list is compiled, the sooner you'll be able to launch your campaign.

Weissman suggests you develop relationships with public service directors by keeping tabs on their professional organizations. 'We've become active in NBACA (National Broadcast Association for Community Affairs) as a way to develop contacts,' she says.

Lastly, it is paramount that every PSA delivered and every campaign mounted in pursuit of the cause be accompanied by detailed contact and support information.

Says Bruce Dundore, chief creative officer and partner Asher/Gal & Partners, which recently developed several anti-tobacco PSAs for California, Washington and Oregon: 'You need a place where people can get involved and get connected - whether that's a Web site, hotline or whatever.'

TECHNIQUE TIPS

- 1 Do make sure the company you represent has the appropriate nonprofit status
 - 2 Do develop a simple, straightforward message
 - 3 Do archive your PSA and related material online for easy access
 - 4 Do develop collateral material illustrating the fine points of your cause
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- 1 Don't forget to include all appropriate contact information
 - 2 Don't limit your PSA package - include 10-, 30- and 60-second clips
 - 3 Don't take celebrity endorsements for granted
 - 4 Don't forget to think locally, even with a national campaign.