

CABLE RESPONDS TO HIV/AIDS

SUMMARY

In one public service advertisement (PSA), Billy Bob Thornton is shown making mistakes in a series of camera outtakes. He explains, "Making mistakes is part of life, but getting HIV is one mistake you don't have to make." He closes by urging viewers to get tested just like he did. In another PSA, a young couple is pictured having sex in a speeding car and clearly risking their lives. There is no dialogue, but words on the screen tell viewers not to be irresponsible and to use a condom.

Two very different PSAs, and yet both were a product of Cable Positive, a campaign started by three cable executives to use the resources of the entire cable industry to fight HIV/AIDS. "Many of them had lost colleagues and friends," explains Steve Villano, the executive director of Cable Positive. "They didn't want to stand idly by," he says of the group's founders. "They wanted to use their skills to do good."

Cable Positive's approach is unique because it is both a resource for the industry and a vehicle for it to act collectively on a critical issue. The organization funds medical research, workplace training programs for the cable industry, and assistance for cable employees living with HIV/AIDS. It also helps to produce and place PSAs on cable networks, especially to mark World AIDS Day (December 1) and National HIV Testing Day (June 27).

In the month leading up to National HIV Testing Day, for example, Cable Positive estimates the cable industry provided close to 200 hours of HIV/AIDS programming to 70 million households. On the day itself, at 8 p.m., all participating cable systems and networks aired Cable Positive PSAs at the same time. "Securing airtime is not as much a challenge for us as it might be for other HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention organizations because we are a creation of the industry and we have a special relationship with national cable networks and local cable systems," points out Villano. In fact, Cable Positive board members include representatives of leading cable networks, like BET, Lifetime, and Showtime.

One reason they are able to get multiple networks to participate, campaign officials say, is because of the diversity of PSAs they offer them. Some are in Spanish. Some are geared towards young people. Some, such as the one of the couple in the car, are edgier. "We send out a number of different PSAs on a reel," explains Villano. "The network or cable system can choose because they know their market best."

Noting that not all messages will work with all networks, Jim Coltharp, who is the senior director of public policy at Comcast Corporation and a Cable Positive Board member says, "I have focused on the testing and awareness messages and not the 'safe-sex' message. As a corporate entity with a variety of customers as opposed to a niche audience, it is a better message [for us]."

For the most part, Cable Positive has creative control over all PSA development. That might mean convincing Magic Johnson to do a BET PSA to address HIV/AIDS in the African-American community. It might mean testing messages not only in focus groups, but more often with board members and other cable industry executives who understand marketing, not to mention their audiences. It might even mean deciding what kind of 800 number to use for counseling and referrals. "It became easier for Cable Positive to use our 800 number," explains Ana Oliveira of the Gay Men's Health Crisis. Likewise, Cable Positive says it often turns to AIDS advocates themselves for guidance. "We are advisors," explains Oliveira. "We have conversations around critical target audiences, critical messages."

Cable industry representatives stress that, given the scope of the problem and its impact on their particular audiences, they can't afford to turn away. "Because of the incidence of HIV in minority communities, we've tried to [use] these spots to highlight the crisis in our communities," explains Coltharp. "Many people are uncomfortable with the topic and may prefer to not have to deal with it. But it is so pervasive, and the statistics for young people so huge, PSAs are a small way we can help and get a message out."

Yet while confident they are doing good, those at Cable Positive are less certain about their results. "It's tough to answer whether or not we are having success," Villano acknowledges. "Many factors go into the spread of HIV/AIDS. It is much more difficult to measure whether your PSA has changed someone's behavior than to measure how much Budweiser you've sold. It is a far more sophisticated science of measurement. A lot of us have to begin to pay more attention to that."

For many involved in the campaign, this mission is personal. A year after the campaign began, one of Cable Positive's founders, Brad Wojcoski, lost his own battle with AIDS. Now the question is, can Cable Positive use his vision and passion to save others from his fate?

Cable Positive

BACKGROUND

Sponsor: Cable Positive

Purpose: To prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS

When: 1994 to present

How much: While Cable Positive does not calculate the overall dollar value of donated airtime for its PSAs, the organization estimates that this past HIV Testing Day (2001), cable networks and systems provided close to 200 hours of HIV/AIDS programming to 70 million households.

Donated/Paid: Donated



THE CAMPAIGN

In 1992, three cable executives – Jeffrey Bernstein, then of Request Television, and Brad Wojcoski and June Winters of HBO – got together to create a new nonprofit organization, Cable Positive. Their idea was to use the resources of the cable industry to make a difference on AIDS. "They had the skills for communicating information, and many of them had lost colleagues and friends," notes Cable Positive's executive director, Steve Villano. "They didn't want to stand idly by. They wanted to use their skills to do good." In fact, just one year after the organization was created, one of its founders, fell victim to AIDS.

Cable Positive's approach is unique because it is both a resource for the industry, and a vehicle for it to act collectively on a critical issue. The organization develops public service advertisements (PSAs) for national broadcast, often working directly with cable networks to produce ads that are then shown on their channels. Cable Positive also funds PSAs that raise awareness about local HIV/AIDS services, and it supports educational programs, workplace training, medical research, and assistance for cable employees and their families living with HIV/AIDS.

While several of the participating networks run Cable Positive PSAs throughout the year, the group's primary emphasis is to secure broadcast on two dates: World AIDS Day (December 1) and National HIV Testing Day (June 27). Prior to those two dates, the organization sends reels with a variety of different PSAs to cable networks and systems nationwide. For this past National HIV Testing Day, Cable Positive circulated a reel with more than 20 PSAs, including some in Spanish. Every PSA includes a toll-free number for more information about testing and other services in the community.

"We send out a number of different PSAs on a reel," explains Villano. "The network or cable system can choose because they know their market best." The different PSAs are intended to appeal to diverse audiences, and some are edgier than others. One PSA, for example, shows a young couple having sex in a speeding car, serving as a metaphor for risking one's life through unprotected sex. There is no dialogue, but words on the screen urge viewers not to be irresponsible and to use a condom.

Cable Positive also has used its connections to get testimonials from celebrities such as the actor Billy Bob Thornton and Magic Johnson. In one spot, Billy Bob Thornton is shown in camera outtakes making mistakes. He says, "Making mistakes is part of life, but getting HIV is one mistake you don't have to make." He then urges viewers to get tested like he did, and says they will feel better for it. "When celebrities speak on the messages, they normalize [the issue]," states Ana Oliveira of the Gay Men's Health Crisis. "They have a destigmatizing impact and help to show ownership by various communities."

"We are selective in the spots we use," notes Jim Coltharp, the senior director of public policy at Comcast Corporation and a Cable Positive board member. "I have focused on the testing and awareness messages and not the 'safe sex' message. As a corporate entity with a variety of customers as opposed to a niche audience, it is a better message [for us]." He goes on to say that it is his impression that "the full range of the PSAs end up being shown" because each individual cable network selects different PSAs to fit its unique audience.

Each local cable system and each national cable network determines whether it will air the PSAs, which PSAs it will air, and how frequently. "We run the ads starting two months prior to the two key dates, World AIDS Day and AIDS Testing Day," explains Coltharp. "We run them across our channels probably a dozen times each day, with greater frequency the two weeks prior, probably 20 to 40 times each day."

To get the ads produced, Cable Positive also uses the services of the cable networks with which it works. "For example, we went to BET and asked them to help us produce a PSA with Magic Johnson," explains Villano. "We participated in the NBA All Star weekend to raise awareness of HIV, and during that weekend we convinced Magic to shoot the PSA. BET contributed time, talent, and production." In those instances when it is unable to get work donated by the cable industry, Cable Positive has relationships with producers who will create the PSAs at reduced costs.

While Cable Positive has creative control over its PSA development, it solicits recommendations from many sources, including its board and cable industry executives. "On our board we have several folks who are involved in marketing," notes Villano.

The organization acknowledges it doesn't end up doing a lot of research to develop messages or test PSA concepts. "Sometimes we will test PSAs with an audience," explains Villano. "We tested our Latino spot and got a positive response. We look to see if it makes an impression." More often, Cable Positive looks to cable industry executives for not only their own personal reactions but also for their knowledge of their markets. "The PSA with the couple having sex in a car felt too racy to industry executives, but it was received well by the target audience, Latinos," states Villano.

Cable Positive's creative control extends to determining whether and how a national 800 number will be used. "We offer an 800 number for counseling and referral," explains Oliveira. "It became easier for Cable Positive to use our 800 number. Because of our name, we are useful to reach communities that are gay, bisexual, non-sexually conforming. The name of the agency helps people reach out for information no matter where they are."

The campaign is constantly reevaluating which communities and areas have the greatest needs in determining where to focus its efforts. "Last year, we knew we wanted to reach youth, Latinos, and women. This year, with the huge increase in HIV infection in communities of color, we wanted the focus on the African-American community," stresses Villano. And, by working with organizations like Voice of America, Cable Positive is starting to extend its message abroad, including airing PSAs that are heard as far away as Africa.

Often Cable Positive turns to AIDS advocates for guidance. "We are advisors," explains Oliveira. "We have conversations around critical target audiences, critical messages, how to balance complacency around HIV, its spreading to more vulnerable communities, etc. There is a level where we have input and influence." Villano adds, "In our work with AIDS organizations we look at where the newest developments are and where the newest focus is, and needs to be, in educating people about the virus."

Campaign officials stress that they are able to generate more attention to the issue because they offer networks a variety of messages to fit their comfort level. However, many in the industry emphasize that the need in their markets offsets any potential discomfort in highlighting the issue in their programming. "Comcast went from being a company largely serving suburbs to one that serves many major areas, including both the suburbs and inner cities," explains Coltharp. "Because of incidence of HIV in minority communities, we've tried to [use] these spots to highlight the crisis in our communities. Many people are uncomfortable with the topic and may prefer to not have to deal with it. But it is so pervasive and the statistics for young people are so huge, PSAs are a small way we can help and get a message out."

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Every major cable network and cable system participates in Cable Positive's public education efforts by showing HIV/AIDS PSAs, programming, or both. Cable Positive estimates that this past HIV Testing Day (2001), cable networks and systems provided close to 200 hours of programming to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS to 70 million households that subscribe to cable television (roughly 60 percent of all U.S. households) in the month of June alone. The programming culminated with a "roadblock" on National HIV Testing Day when participating cable systems and networks aired Cable Positive PSAs.

While Cable Positive has been successful in getting its PSAs aired, its officials are less sure about the impact they may be having on the spread of HIV. "It is tough to answer whether or not we are having success," explains Villano. "Many factors go into the spread of HIV. We look for communications measurements: how many times a PSA has played, how much aggregate time the cable systems and networks have donated to air the message, how many people saw it, reaction from focus groups in testing the message, reports from the CDC about their 800 number at the time of the campaign, etc. We're dealing with a health care issue that has behavioral, cultural, and economic components, and subject to other variables that you can't control. It is much more difficult to measure whether your PSA has changed someone's behavior than to measure how much Budweiser you've sold. We're not dealing with a product in the same way. This is much more intangible. It is a far more sophisticated science of measurement. A lot of us have to begin to pay more attention to that."

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Cable Positive plans to continue with its same process of distributing multiple PSAs two times each year and working with cable systems and networks to run and produce PSAs. For the next World AIDS Day, it plans to gear the campaign toward youth.