

BREAKING THE SILENCE

A Campaign to Stop Domestic Violence

SUMMARY

A man and woman are getting ready to go to bed. They hear a violent argument going on upstairs. They look up at the ceiling. They look at each other. The man rolls over. But instead of picking up the phone to help, he turns off the light. So went the first public service advertisement (PSA) produced in 1994 by the Family Violence Prevention Fund.

“Focus groups were stunned,” remembers campaign pollster Ethel Klein of EDK Associates, when talking about the ending. “It was very unexpected.” In the first four months, the campaign sponsors estimate, that haunting image ran 14,000 times on stations across the nation. In testing, the recall rating for this PSA was higher than for most messages. What’s more, just a few months into the campaign, 74 percent of Americans said that domestic violence was a serious issue, up from 57 percent three years earlier.

Campaign officials acknowledge that, like everything in life, much of this success was due to good – yet very tragic – timing. “As we were preparing to release the campaign, O.J. hit,” explains Lisa Lederer of PR Solutions, who helped coordinate the launch. “We got it out quickly to be visible. Court TV was running our ads, and so were CNN and the networks. We had 18 cameras at the press conference. People were doing shows on Simpson and domestic violence. It was like nothing I had ever seen. We ended up having a six-month teach-in on the issue.”

And the national exposure did seem to translate into greater pickup for the PSAs, at least in the early months. In 1994, when the campaign was launched, it received approximately \$38 million in placements, according to Ad Council estimates – about one-third of which was on television. By 1995, that figure had dropped to \$9 million, with about half that amount on television.

At the same time, says Lederer, referring to the media coverage that helped place the PSAs, “It wasn’t all good. O.J. Simpson coverage also created misconceptions like African Americans committing more domestic violence. There was also a lot of victim blaming such as ‘she had means, why didn’t she leave.’” Still, over the next few years, the “impact was enormous,” remembers David Altschiller, the creative director behind the advertising, when recalling the combination of the trial and the Family Violence Prevention Fund campaign, which already had been in the works for two years when Nicole Brown Simpson was killed.

But the campaign had another thing going for it besides good timing: a corporate advocate. It all began in 1992, when Esta Soler, executive director of the Family Violence Prevention Fund, started planning a public education campaign to create a national conversation about domestic violence. “Messages about an issue of this size and complexity cannot be directed just at those who are caught in it,” notes Soler. “We had to take this very private issue and make it public.” At the same time, Liz Claiborne Inc. was starting to use its own resources to tackle domestic violence through its Women’s Work program, and the two groups decided to work together, which they have continued to do to this day.

According to the Family Violence Prevention Fund, Liz Claiborne proved to be an invaluable partner, convincing its ad agency to do the creative, and helping to get the Ad Council to take on the cause. “The Ad Council opened up the doors to us,” explains Altschiller. “They have the real media contact and clout to get pro bono work placed in radio, TV, and magazines. Up to that point, the Family Violence Prevention Fund didn’t have that.”

What they did have, say campaign officials, was a powerful message borne of a lot of research, trial and error, and, after some initial disagreement, a meeting of the minds between the advocates and the creative team. “We started out thinking we would have to convince people about why men beat women,” explains Klein. “In focus groups...we got lots of different answers, but the bottom line was that in each group, someone got frustrated with the dialogue. They would say, ‘It doesn’t matter. There is no excuse.’ That learning changed the direction of the campaign.”

Because of the attention given to the O.J. trial, the first phase of the campaign, which was designed to create awareness about domestic violence, was completed far earlier than expected. Soler notes, “The first phase was widespread conversation; the next is to drop the numbers of violence.”

That goal comes across in a more recent PSA. In it, a child sits alone on the stairs, listening to parents fighting in the other room. The ad closes with an appeal to call for more information. According to Lederer, callers receive “advice on how to talk to a batterer, how to be safe, etc. We were trying to say that people shouldn’t pretend they don’t see abuse when it occurs.” In the next phase of the campaign, its leaders say they have decided to target men and help them realize that domestic violence is their issue too.

They acknowledge, however, that it is much easier to increase awareness than to decrease violence; that there is still a need for more accurate ways of measuring the scope of the problem; and that, in the future, their campaign is unlikely to receive the same kind of unprecedented boost from a news story as it did during the earlier years. “The usage of the spots went way down after the Simpson case,” explains Lederer. “The flip side of the intensity was the steep drop in usage.”

But nevertheless, campaign officials insist they are in this for the long haul. “A public education campaign takes a lot of time,” warns Soler. “It is not a project that can be done in a couple of weeks; it can take years.” And, of course, when the topic has been shrouded in silence for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, it can take even longer than that.

“There’s No Excuse for Domestic Violence”

BACKGROUND

Sponsor: The Family Violence Prevention Fund, in partnership with the Ad Council and Liz Claiborne

Purpose: To create a public conversation about domestic violence

When: 1994 to present

How much: The Ad Council estimates the campaign received \$41 million in donated airtime on cable and broadcast from 1994-1998 (\$100 million in donated media overall).

Donated / Paid: Donated

THE CAMPAIGN

In 1992, when the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPF) began planning its campaign, the research was clear: Domestic violence was an enormous problem in America. The group knew it needed to go beyond the existing efforts that were raising awareness about services for batterers and their victims. “We looked at similar campaigns such as smoking and drunk driving,” explains Esta Soler, executive director of the Family Violence Prevention Fund. “It was clear to us and persuasive to the Ford Foundation, who provided the initial grant, that a campaign focused just on those who need help is important, but doesn’t push deep social change.”

Instead, the FVPF decided to take what was at that time a very private issue and create a public conversation – so that both violence and the silence around it would become unacceptable. “Esta’s vision was a cultural climate change,” remarks Ethel Klein of EDK Associates, the pollster for the campaign. “That was a pretty scary proposition because it set such a high bar for success.” As it turned out, the FVPF was about to get a lot of help from both a corporate partner and the news media, which saturated the airwaves with information about domestic violence in the months after the Nicole Brown Simpson murder.



As the FVPF was planning a public awareness campaign out of its San Francisco office, Liz Claiborne was starting to use its own resources to make a difference on domestic violence – an issue about which it knew its customers cared. Soler noticed Liz Claiborne's activities in the San Francisco area and the two groups decided to work together. "We saw this as a wonderful opportunity," explains Soler. "Suddenly the effort to address domestic violence was on a whole new level." The FVPF board provided \$250,000 for research and planning. Liz Claiborne convinced its advertising agency to take on the work pro bono. All that was left was distribution.

With Liz Claiborne's introduction, the FVPF was able to convince the Ad Council to take on the cause. "The Ad Council opened up the doors to us," explains David Altschiller, the creative director behind the advertising. "They have the real media contact and clout to get pro bono work placed in radio, television, and magazines. Up to that point, FVPF didn't have that."

What they did have, according to campaign officials, was a strong message created through painstaking research. "It is important to do research," notes Soler. "The advocates have important expertise on this issue, and by linking that knowledge with the general public's understanding, we can create powerful communications that reach a broad audience."

In the early stages of campaign planning, the FVPF put together an advisory group of people working on domestic violence – judges, advocates, police, business leaders – each of whom offered different perspectives. "Bringing all those people together was a major challenge," explains Klein. "We started out thinking we would have to convince people about why men beat women...It would have been hard to take this to the committee, because each committee member was vested in a particular answer."

But focus group research pointed to a different message. "In focus groups, we asked 'why do men beat women?'" reports Klein. "We got lots of different answers, but the bottom line was that in each group, someone got frustrated with the dialogue. They would say 'It doesn't matter. There is no excuse.' That learning changed the direction of the campaign."

"The logic was simple," suggests Altschiller. "It appeared as if people were hiding behind excuses for inaction. Nobody wanted to be on the hook and would make the excuse – 'it's not our business.' Police had the excuse that when you jump into these situations it's dangerous, the cop gets in middle, the woman goes back anyway, so you don't accomplish much. Hospitals made the excuse that it was hard to determine who was a victim since women denied it. Men made the excuse they were either drunk, or out of work, or distraught, or goaded into escalating the situation by women. When you see the answer, it is simple – there's no excuse for domestic violence."

With the strategy in hand, Altschiller and his team started, by trial and error, to come up with advertising concepts that everyone felt would be effective and appropriate.

"Working with agencies to develop creative can be hard, especially when they are doing it pro bono. Sometimes they love what they produce when we think it's off message," states Lisa Lederer of PR Solutions, the public relations consultant for the campaign. "The first things they showed were not right. They were new to the issue, and they were going to familiar images, illuminating the problem, when we wanted to focus on solutions and prevention. There is often a learning curve. They are teaching folks in the movement about advertising, and we are teaching them about the issue."

According to campaign officials, the FVPF and the creative team were able to work through the initial disagreements. "David Altschiller decided early on that he would spend a lot of time on this," remembers Soler. "We have had a great relationship with a lot of give and take. It was hard at times, but always respectful. I always felt I had an equal voice. We had the substantive knowledge and he had the creative expertise."

The end result, according to campaign officials, was powerful. "In the TV ad, a man and woman are in bed and there is a horrific argument upstairs," describes Soler. "They look at the ceiling; they look at each other. The man rolls over, but instead of picking up the phone, he turns out the light. Then the message, 'There's No Excuse for Domestic Violence. It is your business,' and a number to call for more information." "In the ad, when the guy rolls over and turns out the light," notes Klein, "focus group participants were stunned. It was very unexpected." In subsequent tests, the commercial generated a recall score fully 15 percent above the average for other Ad Council campaigns.

Altschiller gives partial credit for the power of the final ads to the networks' refusal to air the initial concepts. "The violence had to be shown off-camera," he explains. "The networks refused to have any violence on TV. It is enough to make you crazy that the major providers of imagined and created violence would not allow you to show violence in order to abhor it. In reality, what they did was help us create much more effective commercials."

But perhaps more than anything, the PSAs they created benefited from good – yet very tragic – timing. Just as the team was about to launch the campaign, the O.J. Simpson murder trial hit the news. "We knew there would be a lot of media attention so we accelerated our timetable," remarks Soler. "We were close enough with development and production that we could come out with the ad at the same time O.J. Simpson was arraigned. It was released in D.C. with Donna Shalala [then Secretary of Health and Human Services]."

"O.J. increased our pickup," notes Lederer. "Court TV was running our ads, and so were CNN and the networks. We had 18 cameras at the press conference. People were doing shows on Simpson and domestic violence. It was like nothing I had ever seen. We ended up having a six-month teach-in on the issue."

The national media exposure the campaign received did indeed appear to translate into greater placement for PSAs: the campaign's television PSAs aired 14,000 times during the campaign's first four months (as compared with 1,100 PSAs per month for an average Ad Council campaign). "But it wasn't all good," notes Lederer, referring to the media coverage that helped place the PSAs. "O.J. Simpson coverage also created misconceptions like African Americans committing more domestic violence. There was also a lot of victim blaming – 'she had means, why didn't she leave?' A lot of the coverage was fairly superficial."

Still, "over the next year or two, the impact was enormous," remembers Altschiller, when talking about the combination of the PSAs and the attention to the O.J. Simpson trial. "We were really gaining ground in awareness, in the feeling that it is an important issue, and in willingness to stand up and be involved. We were making progress. People were starting to give it a place among the problems we have in this country."

Since they felt they had achieved awareness of the issue, the campaign shifted its goal to trying to get people to act. In one of the spots, a small child sits alone on the stairs. In the other room (off-camera), a fight erupts over having a good dinner ready. The father slaps the mother as she pleads for him to stop. The ad closes with an appeal to call for more information.

The fulfillment piece explained how to deal with a personal situation. "It included how to talk to a batterer, how to be safe, how to help a victim, how to talk to a child, etc.," explains Lederer. "We were trying to say that people shouldn't pretend they don't see abuse when it occurs."

But it wasn't just the O.J. trial that increased the amount of time donated to the PSAs, say campaign officials. In addition to the Ad Council's distribution to 22,000 media outlets, the FVPF had advocates take the PSAs to local stations. "You

have to work it, you can't just send a spot out there and hope it runs," explains Lederer. "One of the reasons we were successful is that we contacted shelters and programs all over the country and worked with them in taking the ads to local stations. Having local people say 'it matters to us' made a big difference in placement."

"The campaigns that are the most successful are when we partner with local groups and they put their name and number on the materials," states Soler. "People identify with their local community. To get it on the air, you need a public service director in a community willing to run it, and they are more willing to run it if it is local." "The advocates' work in distribution enhanced our success dramatically," notes Lederer. "But, it's hard, probably impossible, to quantify the difference it made." And the difference is in areas that go beyond raising public awareness, say those responsible for the campaign.

"The FVPF used these communications efforts to get other things," explains Klein. "This was not just public education for the public, but was also about getting doctors to create protocols for doctors, enhanced judicial education, etc. Esta saw this education as being for opinion leaders as well as the public. She saw how to use this to get other things she needed."

All three groups – the FVPF, the Ad Council, and Liz Claiborne – see this as a partnership. The FVPF has worked with the Ad Council, as well as the ad agencies themselves, on creating and distributing their PSAs, and ultimately raising awareness about the issue. The group's efforts with Liz Claiborne, on the other hand, tend to more narrowly focused, and include creating educational materials and handbooks. "There are lots of ways to work together that don't necessarily involve money," states Jane Randel of Liz Claiborne. "They help us with their knowledge. We run everything by them. You are literally talking life and death here; we don't want to send the wrong message."

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

From 1994 to 1998, the Ad Council estimates that the campaign received over \$100 million in donated media, including \$41 million on broadcast and cable television. While the PSAs continue to air today, the bulk of the media ran just after the campaign was launched, during the height of the O.J. Simpson arraignment and trial. In the first four months of the campaign, the PSA aired 14,000 times, which compares with the Ad Council average of 1,100 times per month.

In 1994, when the campaign was launched, it received \$38 million in support, about one-third of that for television PSAs. Starting in 1995, support slipped to \$9 million, about half of which was for television placements. With the launch of new radio spots, media time jumped to \$31 million in 1996, with \$21 million of that in radio. Since 1997, total annual support has varied from \$3 million to \$12 million.

"We have learned that over time, public service advertising directors will not play older work with great frequency," explains Priscilla Natkins, executive vice president of campaign management for the Ad Council. "Because so little new work was done, donated media levels were impacted."

While it is hard to separate their efforts from the visibility of the O.J. Simpson trial, campaign officials believe they have helped take what was once a very private issue and make it a public concern. After the first few months of the campaign, in January 1995, 67 percent of men and 80 percent of women viewed domestic violence as a very serious problem – up from 57 percent in 1991. Their tracking figures confirm increased awareness of the issue. "We saw a lasting change in terms of people saying they know someone who has been abused," reports Lederer. "People are more comfortable talking about domestic violence now," explains Randel. "The handbooks we have worked together on, we can't keep them in stock. People are screaming for resources, particularly ones that are easily understood and accessible."

FUTURE CHALLENGES

What is unclear, however, is whether they have helped decrease incidents of domestic violence. “As awareness built you saw big increases in people going to court, getting restraining orders,” explains Lederer. “At first it appears the problem increases, but it is because people now recognize what is happening to them and to those around them. There will be an increase in reports before it goes down.”

For example, FVPF public opinion tracking from July 1994 through February 1995 shows a seven percentage point increase in the number of women admitting they have been physically abused (31 percent, up from 24 percent). Additionally, in the three months after Nicole Brown Simpson was murdered, the number of people seeking help from local domestic violence agencies increased 39 percent. “Our data sources are very criminal-justice driven,” notes Soler. “It is hard to measure our impact. There have been some household surveys, but we need more of that.”

Some on the team measure success in different terms. They point to a phone call or letter from a woman saved, and feel their work is worthwhile. “Success is ‘I saved one life,’” Randel explains. “If we have helped one person, that’s success.”

Campaign officials say their most difficult challenge is sustaining interest in the issue. “The usage of the spots went way down after the Simpson case,” explains Lederer. “The flip side of the intensity was the steep drop in usage.”

To bring attention back to the issue, the FVPF and the Ad Council are working on new creative for their advertising. For the next phase of the campaign, the FVPF has decided to directly target men. It wants to speak to men in a nonthreatening way, and help them realize that domestic violence is not just a women’s issue, but an issue for them as well.

The campaign also intends to move beyond raising awareness and focus its future efforts on creating action. “We were able to raise the visibility of the issue, and make the statement that Americans have a role to play in the solution,” notes Soler. “The challenge is to hold our feet to the fire with others who are doing this work in reducing the problem and truly effect change. The first phase was widespread conversation; the next is to drop the numbers of violence.” “The question becomes,” asks Klein, “how do you build on consciousness raising to get to the next level?”