

ONE YEAR AFTER COLUMBINE

A Public Education Campaign against Youth Violence

SUMMARY

Exactly one year after the shootings at Columbine, broadcast and cable networks aired a version of the following public service advertisement (PSA) sponsored by the National Campaign Against Youth Violence (NCAYV): A hockey coach tells his team he is not wasting his time coaching cheerleaders. "I need men who hit and hit hard," he urges. As the spot continues, his face and voice morph into a boy's face and voice, with the boy saying, "I want to see blood out there. Either take it like a man or take a seat on the bench." The tag line: "Is there any real way to stop youth violence? Try starting with yourself."

Like many new public education campaigns, the one that this ad was developed for faced plenty of challenges. But it was unusual in one respect: Few of the public education campaigns launched each year have their start in the Rose Garden.

It was 1999, and the nation was stunned by the recent shootings at Columbine and other schools across the country. The public was looking for solutions, and so were its elected officials. President Clinton held an event at the White House at which he announced the formation of the NCAYV, a new nonprofit organization dedicated to combating youth violence. Part of its broad mission would include a public service campaign. "From the get go, the White House sought out the Ad Council to be the provider of the PSA campaign with the group they formed," recalls Priscilla Natkins, executive vice president for campaign management at the Ad Council.

The NCAYV and the Ad Council were eager to create a stand-out PSA campaign and to launch it quickly. This meant raising the necessary funds, identifying a core message, developing the ads, and meeting with

networks, all before the new organization had really gotten off the ground. In retrospect, campaign officials acknowledge that the PSAs – which they had envisioned as one of many initiatives – ended up taking up far more time than they had anticipated. Jeff Bleich, the founding executive director of NCAYV, reflects, "My staff and I spent a lot of time working on something that was only a small piece of the puzzle. We underestimated the time cost and collateral consequences"

The goal for the public education campaign was to challenge the normalization of violence in American culture by targeting adults and young people. The PSAs geared toward adults were intended to make people aware of the ways that their actions, like the coach yelling at his hockey players, set an example of violence. For the youth messages, the plan was to use the real voices of young people talking about their experiences in order to stress nonviolence as an acceptable alternative and show teens how to get out of a potentially violent situation.

Research and creative development continued as the launch date – the one-year anniversary of Columbine – neared. Ultimately, the team got its first look at the rough cuts of the PSAs two days before the anniversary. And, there was a problem. It was felt that the PSAs did not adequately stress one of the critical messages: how to leave a violent situation. "There were disagreements about the initial edit that we first received," acknowledges Natkins. "We wanted to ensure that the repudiation of violence was clear." "They found great real kids who were credible," explains Holly Potter, a consultant to the NCAYV and its acting communications director, "but the ads didn't convey how to get out of violence. People want to know how to get out."

The NCAYV board, as well as key representatives at the networks, agreed. But, with a commitment made to air on the anniversary, there was no time to completely redo the ads. Furthermore, a “road block,” where multiple networks agree to air a spot during a given time period, had been confirmed. So the team reached a compromise: the adult spots would be aired, and two of the four youth spots deemed least problematic would be also released. In the end, the Ad Council tracked roughly \$24 million in donated media for the campaign, including \$2 million on broadcast and cable television for the PSAs.

After the launch, the youth ads were re-edited and testing demonstrated that these new versions were on target. But another problem had now cropped up: the spots for adults, which the team had initially thought were strong, were not received well by the focus groups. “In

focus groups, adults would see the coach in the ad and say “that man is a monster and I’m nothing like that,” explains Potter. “You don’t want to blame the audience or make the problem so horrific that they believe they can’t do anything.”

“We were rather surprised with the response from the adults in the focus groups,” remembers Natkins. “In our judgment, the strategy was well thought out, and the work very strong. If additional resources were available, we would have liked to have explored the concerns further. Focus groups notwithstanding, we think the adult work, if distributed, would be well-received by the media community and equally important, make adults think differently about their behavior.”

In the end, citing the expense and the initial negative response from the networks, the NCAYV decided against any mass distribution of the PSAs. Today, the organization continues to debate the appropriate role for a public education campaign in its overall work. “We have ramped up our emphasis in having co-branded messages with partners,” notes Sarah Ingersoll, the current executive director of the NCAYV, who took over from Jeff Bleich. “There is an opportunity for us to serve as a broker showing many examples of solutions.” “Lots of partners are offering to do this,” notes Bleich, who remains involved with the NCAYV. “It seems like a more promising strategy.”

Reflecting on the past two years, Bleich believes there is a lesson in his experience: “The problem is that the people who create the ads and the Ad Council may move on, but your PSAs will brand you forever. So it is crucial that it be a message you are comfortable with.”

The National Campaign Against Youth Violence



BACKGROUND

Sponsor: The National Campaign Against Youth Violence, in partnership with the Ad Council

Purpose: To challenge the normalization of violence in American society

When: Launched April 20, 2000 – the anniversary of the shootings at Columbine

How much: The Ad Council estimates the campaign received \$24 million in overall media donations, including \$1.9 million on broadcast and cable television.

Donated/Paid: Donated

THE CAMPAIGN

In the aftermath of the school shooting at Columbine, then-President Bill Clinton brought together leaders from business, the media, foundations, government, education, and other sectors of society for the White House Strategy Session on Children, Violence, and Responsibility. Standing in the Rose Garden after the event, Clinton called for a campaign to prevent youth violence.

Three months later, the president announced the creation of the nonprofit National Campaign Against Youth Violence (NCAYV). From the start, it was clear that the organization’s broad mission would include developing public service messages to combat youth violence. “From the get go, the White House sought out the Ad Council to be the provider of the PSA campaign with the group they formed,” recalls Priscilla Natkins, executive vice president of campaign management for the Ad Council.

The team was eager to create a stand-out PSA campaign and to launch it quickly. In addition to the PSA component, the NCAYV, however, was also building an entire organization with a variety of initiatives. Jeff Bleich, the founding executive director of the NCAYV, reflects, “We needed to get [the overall effort] off the ground, to make violence prevention part of the corporate, business, and youth agenda.” But the task of developing PSAs takes time and resources. “My staff and I spent a lot of time working on something that was only a small piece of the puzzle,” says Bleich. “We underestimated the time cost and collateral consequences.”

Sarah Ingersoll, who took over from Bleich as the current executive director of the NCAYV agrees, “Initially, the community level activities and the ads didn’t relate to each other.” Instead, notes Holly Potter, a consultant to the NCAYV and its acting communications director, “The PSA strategy was driving the overall strategy. The ad agency and Ad Council came in with a great deal of expertise and legitimacy and said this was the direction we should go, perhaps not realizing they were driving the organizational strategy.”

The campaign also needed to come up with the necessary funding to develop the new creative. As a new organization, however, it was simultaneously also trying to raise operating funds as well as resources for its initiatives. The extra burden of fund-raising for a public education effort proved to be a hurdle. “[Public service campaigns] are a lot more expensive than you think,” cautions Bleich. “The Ad Council said it would cost one million dollars to do two campaigns. We thought we could bring that cost down, in part because people were falling all over themselves to help for free.” But the fund-raising was not going well and the campaign was in debt. Explains Bleich, “We were always behind, always owed the Ad Council. To their credit, the ad agency kept doing work, but the level of anxiety grew high.”

The Ad Council and the NCAYV agreed that the new ads would target both adults and young people and try to change the normalization of violence in American culture. Bleich explains, “The theory was not ‘see an ad and stop being violent.’ Instead, the idea was to convey that ‘it is okay to get into this area. It is cool. Peacemaking is cool.’” Adds Natkins, “In the efforts targeting kids, we were trying to destigmatize a pacifist approach to violent situations. We were trying to make nonviolence a heroic act in the eyes of kids.”

In testing PSA concepts with youth, the NCAYC learned that teens would prefer to hear messages from other teens. So using a personal style, they interviewed real teens speaking candidly about a violent encounter and how they removed themselves from it without using violence. “Their stories were compelling,” says Bleich, “heartbreaking but hopeful.” The NCAYV agreed to communicate four components in the ads: 1) there was a violent situation; 2) it was necessary to make a choice; 3) the teens need to be shown being able to get out of the violent situation; and 4) they need to feel better about themselves because of their action.

The team came up with a different message for adults. “Our research suggested that adults didn’t realize the way they behaved themselves could influence their kids,” notes Natkins. “We wanted adults to realize that kids are modeling them. We were telling adults to be better role models and to model nonviolent behavior.” This strategy resulted in a television concept featuring an adult, such as a coach, encouraging violent behavior. The adult morphs into a child who continues to speak using the adult’s words. In one PSA, a hockey coach insists he is not wasting his time coaching cheerleaders. “I need men who hit and hit hard,” he urges. As the spot continues, his face and voice morph into a boy’s face and voice, with the boy saying, “I want to see blood out there. Either take it like a man or take a seat on the bench.” Most of the adult ads end with the tag line: “Is there any real way to stop youth violence? Try starting with yourself.”

Research and creative development continued as the launch date – the one-year anniversary of Columbine – neared. Ultimately, the team got its first look at the rough cuts of the PSAs two days before the anniversary. And there was a problem. It was felt that the youth PSAs didn’t adequately stress one of the critical messages. The director had used 25 seconds of continuous dialogue to add to the realism of the scenario, but young viewers were not told how to get out of a violent situation. In one message that did eventually air, a young person named Gordon talks about how his friends urge him to ride with them to fight enemies, and he struggles with that decision. He says, “I’m not trying to graduate to the penitentiary. I’m in college right now.” “They found great real kids who were credible,” explains Potter, “but the ads didn’t convey how to get out of violence. People want to know how to get out.”

The NCAYV board, as well as key representatives at the networks, agreed. But, with the deadline just two days away, there was no time to significantly rework the ads. With a commitment made for the spots to air on the anniversary, the team reached a compromise: the adult PSAs would air on all networks and nearly 50 cable channels as part of a prearranged “road block,” during which the ads run across channels at a specified time; and two of the four youth spots deemed least problematic would be also released.

“After the initial launch, our conclusion was to recut the ads to get the four messages in and get more diversity in voices and faces. Then we would take the recut ads to focus group testing,” comments Bleich. After the launch, testing demonstrated that the revised youth spots fared well, but the spots for adults, which the campaign thought were strong, were not received well by focus group participants.

PSA CAMPAIGN ACCOMPLISHMENTS

“In focus groups, adults would see the coach in the ad and say “that man is a monster and I’m nothing like that,”” explains Potter. “You don’t want to blame the audience or make the problem so horrific that they believe they can’t do anything.” “We were rather surprised with the response from the adults in the focus groups,” remembers Natkins. “In our judgment, the strategy was well thought out and the work very strong. If additional resources were available, we would have liked to have explored the concerns further. She notes, “Focus groups notwithstanding, we think the adult work, if distributed, would be well received by the media community and equally important, make adults think differently about their behavior.”

In addition to the television PSAs, the team also developed radio, newspaper, outdoor, and online advertising. In the end, the Ad Council estimates that the majority of donated time ended up on radio – and to a lesser extent, the Internet.

At the time the PSAs were released to the networks to air on the anniversary of Columbine, the NCAYV intended to distribute them much more widely in the months ahead. But the staff ultimately decided against any mass distribution of the PSAs, citing expense coupled with the initial negative responses from the networks.

Today, the NCAYV continues to debate the appropriate role for a public education campaign in its work, while it reaches out to the major broadcast and cable networks. “We have ramped up our emphasis in having co-branded messages with partners,” notes Sarah Ingersoll. “There is an opportunity for us to serve as a broker showing many examples of solutions.”

Looking back on his experiences, Bleich, who remains involved with the NCAYV, reflects, “The problem is that the people who create the ads and the Ad Council may move on, but your PSAs will brand you forever. So it is crucial that it be a message you are comfortable with and that you have an arrangement where you have final say.”

The Ad Council tracked roughly \$24 million in donated media, including \$1.9 million on broadcast and cable television. Most of the media donation was radio (\$16.6 million); followed by Internet, which was valued at \$4.8 million; and print at \$386,000. In the month after launch, the Web site received 200,000 hits.

The bulk of the television placement was during the airing on the anniversary of Columbine in April 2000. Since the launch, the spots have aired infrequently.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

The Campaign says it plans over the next two years to work closely with media partners who are already involved in the campaign and use them as resources to communicate the antiviolence message. According to Holly Potter, “ABC, NBC, and Univision have already done some PSAs, and NAB has asked us to review PSA scripts. They are looking to us as an expert on the issue, which is a turning point for us.”

The NCAYV also is considering asking its board members to create PSAs, with the NCAYV providing a coordinated tag that links the efforts. “Lots of partners are offering to do this,” notes Bleich. “It seems like a more promising strategy.”