

CONNECTING FOR KIDS

SUMMARY

Some parents are logging on to read articles about foster care. Others are learning about initiatives in their states to decrease child poverty. Every month, there are more than 700,000 hits on the Web site Connectforkids.org – and one of the reasons is the campaign’s public service advertisements (PSAs).

One ad shows two parents meeting with a teacher to talk about their child’s behavioral problems at school. But, in the middle of the conversation, the parents themselves start arguing like children. The father blows raspberries at the mother. They shout “you are” “no you are” back and forth. Viewers are told that parents can feel as frustrated as kids when they don’t have the answers, and they are given the Web site to get “Guidance for Grownups.”

This PSA is from the third campaign Connect for Kids has launched in five years to encourage greater attention to children’s issues and drive people to its Web site. And like many successful campaigns, this one has had its share of highs and lows, changes and lessons, along the way.

Back in 1995, when the Ad Council decided to make a 10-year commitment to children’s issues, it chose as its partner the nonprofit Coalition for America’s Children, which includes more than 300 organizations. The Benton Foundation, which cofounded the Coalition, agreed to help develop and fund a Web site to support the new campaign. At that time, the Internet was still in its infancy, but more and more Americans were logging on every day, and Benton believed a Web site could be a powerful tool to encourage people to take responsibility for all children, not just their own.

When it came time to develop the PSAs, the creative team heard an insight during its focus group research that ended up shaping its communications strategy. Time and again, focus group participants put the blame squarely on parents for all the problems facing children. In fact, when it came to helping children, they rarely identified a role for anyone besides parents. It was agreed that a message about societal responsibility for children had to overcome this barrier.

However, there were some differing views about how to turn that concept into a 30-second television spot. The agency selected by the Ad Council to work on the campaign came up with a PSA called “MADD Dads,” which featured a real organization of former gang members who patrol their streets to fight crime and drugs and keep their own children safe. Filmed in black and white, the first scenes show African-American men, seemingly gang members or criminals, out on urban streets late at night. By the end of the PSA it becomes clear that the situation is not what it seems: Instead of creating violence, these former gang members are working to protect their children from it.

While the ads were certainly edgy, the sponsoring organization, the Coalition for America’s Children/KidsCampaigns, had concerns that they focused only on at-risk children in extreme situations, and therefore would distance, rather than engage, most Americans. At the urging of the Coalition, the creative team included in the final three PSAs one spot the nonprofit group thought middle America could better identify with – a teen painting graffiti, who is later engaged in after-school programs.

Hoping to inform future public service ads, Benton hired independent researchers to test the response to the message. One of those researchers, Dr. Frank Gilliam Jr. of UCLA, examined the impact the PSAs had on the attitudes of viewers. "The most troubling aspect of the PSA was that it actually worked at cross-purposes," notes Gilliam. "Instead of heightening support for comprehensive policies and programs, the ads actually increased levels of negative racial stereotypes and encouraged support for more punitive approaches to criminal justice policy."

Although the sponsors had concerns about the message, they agreed to move forward with the release even before the research was completed. "Creative decisions were driven by individual artistic judgments, not tested in a way that could inform communications," explains Larry Kirkman who then was the president of the Benton Foundation, and is currently dean of the School of Communication at American University. "But we looked at this as a long-term relationship. The Ad Council had made a 10-year commitment to children, representing billions of dollars in media exposure. While this one creative effort might be a disservice to children's issues, or even do damage, we felt there would be other opportunities down the line to communicate stronger messages – and there were."

In fact, soon after the launch of "MADD Dads," one such important opportunity arose. The Ad Council asked then-President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton to appear in a television PSA about children. They agreed. In "The Toughest Job," the president and first lady talk about the importance of the toughest job around, being a parent. "The media response to the ad was so significant," notes Kirkman, "that it made us the top Ad Council Campaign in 1997." In 1997, the entire Connect for Kids campaign received media donations estimated at more than \$100 million, including \$8.7 million on television.

By 1999, the campaign had changed ad agencies, and its Web site had undergone its own transformation. "We needed to refocus the strategy to drive more traffic to the site," states Priscilla Natkins, executive vice president of campaign management for the Ad Council "The agency did a full review of sites and had 'soccer mom' types come in for one-on-ones to navigate the site. From that the agency developed a creative strategy to increase awareness of the site and drive traffic." This strategy led to the development of the "Guidance for Grownups" PSA, utilizing humor and a situation with which every parent can identify, to draw people to the site.

"The breakthrough came when we realized how to best use an ad agency's skills," explains Kirkman. "In the first concepts, we thought the PSAs would have to motivate people or create the context for action. But ad agencies' strength is selling a product, not changing social attitudes. We realized that the Web site was a product that could engage and equip people to solve problems, that it could inspire action, so the PSAs should simply focus on driving traffic to the site."

Connectforkids.org reports it is now averaging 712,000 user sessions a month. "In online surveys, less than 10 percent report that they came to the site due to the ads," states Cecilia Garcia, acting coordinator of Connect for Kids, who currently oversees the campaign, "but our Web trends reports continue to indicate that 'no referring URL' is the top referral, which we see as an indicator of the success of the ads in giving us significant name recognition."

"We discovered that the site itself was so inspirational to people – empowering," suggests Kirkman, "that if we just used communications to get people to the site, the campaign would be successful." "And the site has been shown to help people broaden their outlook on children's issues," says Susan Bales, a founder of the Coalition and Benton's director of children's programs and strategic communications during the development of the campaign. "While people may come looking for more information on a newsy issue like guns, they can be rerouted to consider other influences on children's lives, from after-school programs to health care."

Reflecting on where the campaign is five years later, Garcia says, "I feel like we have had a breakthrough. The [advertising] agency understands what we are trying to do in talking beyond just a personal problem and taking people from the personal to the political. This is not just an exercise in creativity for the sake of creativity."

Connect for Kids

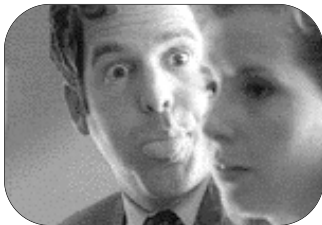
BACKGROUND

Sponsor: Coalition for America's Children, in partnership with the Benton Foundation and the Ad Council

Purpose: To raise awareness about an Internet site that provides parents and other concerned adults with information about children, and the community resources they need to help kids

When: 1996 to present

Exposure: According to the Ad Council, the campaign received an estimated \$250 million in media overall, including \$26 million in television.



THE CAMPAIGN

Back in 1995, when the Ad Council decided to make a 10-year commitment to campaigns about children's issues, the organization knew it needed a nonprofit partner to help tackle all the challenges facing children and bring together the many organizations confronting them. The Benton Foundation suggested a group it had cofounded, the Coalition for America's Children, which includes over 300 organizations.

From the start, officials at Benton believed the only way a public service advertising campaign could make a real difference was to encourage people to look beyond their own families and help all children. "In the early negotiations we insisted that the campaign be about more than volunteerism," notes Larry Kirkman who was then the president of the Benton Foundation, and is currently dean of the School of Communication at American University. "We wanted to move people from the personal to the political and from volunteering to voting. We saw the personal problem as a point of entry, but we wanted people to see that kids' problems are social problems that require public solutions."

Seeing the growing numbers of Americans going online, Benton decided to use the Internet to give parents one place where they could get in-depth information about the challenges facing children – and be connected with the organizations working on their behalf. The Foundation agreed to share overall fund-raising responsibilities with the Ad Council and to build the campaign Web site, KidsCampaigns.org (the precursor to ConnectforKids.org) in time for the launch of their public service advertisements (PSAs). The intent was to make KidsCampaigns.org the fulfillment mechanism – the call to action – for whatever messages were developed during the 10-year campaign. "This was a unique campaign for the Ad Council," explains Kirkman. "The importance of effective fulfillment for this effort dictated equally sharing budget allocations between fulfillment and the production/dissemination of the PSAs."

When it came time to develop the PSAs, the creative team heard an insight during focus group research that ended up shaping its communications strategy. Time and again, focus group participants put the blame squarely on parents for the problems facing children. If children were not doing well in school, if children were violent, using drugs, or otherwise going down the wrong track, the fault lay solely with their parents. In fact, when it came to helping children, these groups rarely identified a role for anyone besides parents. This insight suggested that advertising could play a role in overcoming this barrier by showing the ways that people were collectively taking action for children.

In the first wave of creative development, the team came up with a PSA called "MADD Dads." It featured a real organization of former gang members who patrol their streets to fight crime and drugs and keep their own children safe. Filmed in black and white, the first scenes show African-American men, seemingly gang members or criminals, out on urban streets late at night. But by the end of the PSA, it's clear that the situation is not what it seems. In fact, instead of creating violence, these former gang members are working to protect their children from it.

While the ads were certainly edgy, the sponsoring organization, the Coalition for America's Children/KidsCampaigns, had concerns that they focused only on at-risk children in extreme situations, and therefore would distance, rather than engage, most Americans. At the urging of the Coalition, the creative team included in the final three PSAs a spot the nonprofit thought middle America could better identify with – a teen painting graffiti, who is later engaged in after-school programs.

To inform future creative development, Benton hired independent researchers to test the television PSAs. “The Coalition for America’s Children and many of the organizations within the Coalition had done a significant amount of communications research and had experience in public service advertising,” notes Lisa Tate, a founder of the Coalition and vice president of public affairs at the National Association of Children’s Hospitals “So we had a perspective on how to communicate on this issue and looked to research to inform us.” One of the researchers, Dr. Frank Gilliam Jr. of UCLA, asked viewers to watch a newscast with advertising, including the PSAs. After watching, participants filled out questionnaires designed to measure their attitudes about race, crime, citizen participation, and other core issues and demonstrate whether there were any statistical shifts in their opinions.

In talking about the results of his research, Gilliam explains, “The most troubling aspect of the PSA was that it actually worked at cross-purposes. Put differently, instead of heightening support for comprehensive policies and programs, the ads actually increased levels of negative racial stereotypes and encouraged support for more punitive approaches to criminal justice policy.”

Although the sponsors had concerns about the PSA, they agreed to move forward with its release rather than wait for the results of the research. “Creative decisions were driven by individual artistic judgments, not tested in a way that could inform communications,” explains Kirkman. “But we looked at this as a long-term relationship. The Ad Council had made a 10-year commitment to children, representing billions of dollars in media exposure. While this one creative effort might be a disservice to children’s issues, or even do damage, we felt there would be other opportunities down the line to communicate stronger messages – and there were.”

In fact, soon after the launch of “MADD Dads,” one such important opportunity arose. The Ad Council asked then-President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton to appear in a television PSA about children. They agreed. In “The Toughest Job,” the president and first lady talk about the importance of the toughest job around, being a parent. “The media response to the ad was so significant,” notes Kirkman, “that it made us the top Ad Council Campaign in 1997.” In 1997, the entire Connect for Kids campaign received media donations estimated at more than \$100 million, including \$8.7 million on television.

For the next phase of campaign development, the creative team sought again to stress a message about community responsibility for children, and came up with a PSA called “Help Wanted.” It mimicked newspaper help wanted ads asking people to fill positions like “coach” or “mentor.” While this concept was thought to be the best of those presented, it meant the site had to change to incorporate volunteerism. Explains Susan Bales, who was Benton’s director of children’s programs and strategic communications during the development of the campaign, “Since they had little experience with social issues, it was difficult for the creative team to understand community responsibility beyond volunteerism. We did succeed in lacing the ad with broader community examples, but fundamentally this approach forced us to turn our site, KidsCampaigns, into a volunteer site.”

After two years, the advertising account switched to a new agency and the campaign Web site began undergoing its own transformation. “Our research showed that the word ‘campaigns’ was actually a liability,” notes Kirkman, “because there was such disgust with politicians and politics. So we brought in cognitive linguists to come up with names with a broader appeal. Connect for Kids was the result.” “The site was an inspirational toolbox,” adds Priscilla Natkins, executive vice president of campaign management for the Ad Council. “We wanted parents to be more involved with their communities, but it had to start with the personal realm – their own children. The site was positioned as a vital and welcome resource for parents.”

In March 1999, the new site was launched. Its design was updated, and its tone was less political, but the original purpose was the same – encouraging adults to take collective responsibility for children. When people visit the Web site, they find articles and reports about issues such as child poverty and education. But they don’t just read about the problems. Parents also find information about the solutions – from policies they can help to advance to activities in their own communities. “And the site has been shown to help people broaden their outlook on children’s issues,” says Bales. “While people may come looking for more information on a newsy issue like guns, they can be rerouted to consider other influences on children’s lives, from after-school programs to health care. So the site consciously set out to provide a form of alternative journalism, reframing the way people understand what children’s issues are all about.”

For the launch of the renovated site, the new ad agency suggested taking a more humorous approach and putting more emphasis on encouraging people to visit the Web site. “We needed to refocus the strategy to drive more traffic to the site,” states Natkins. “The agency did a full review of sites and had ‘soccer mom’ types come in for one-on-ones to navigate the site. From that the agency developed a creative strategy to increase awareness of the site and drive traffic.”

The resulting PSA shows parents meeting with their child’s teacher about behavioral problems. During the conversation, the parents start arguing like children, with the father blowing raspberries at the mother and both shouting “you are,” “no you are” back and forth. Viewers are told parents can feel as frustrated as kids when they don’t have the answers. They are told to visit ConnectforKids.org to get the “Guidance for Grownups” to help kids in their community. That PSA has received \$95 million in media exposure, \$7.5 million of which was on television.

“The ad connects with parents by showing circumstances we all face and emotions we all share,” notes Susan Bales. “The PSA allowed us to move in the direction of systemic solutions and speak in a voice that parents could hear. It also helped to drive traffic to the site where we could then provide transformational information to bring people to broader community action.” “We discovered that the site itself was so inspirational to people – empowering,” suggests Kirkman, “that if we just used communications to get people to the site, the campaign would be successful.”

Connectforkids.org reports it is now averaging 712,000 user sessions a month. “In online surveys, less than 10 percent report that they came to the site due to the ads,” states Cecilia Garcia, acting coordinator of Connect for Kids, who currently oversees the campaign, “but our Web trends reports continue to indicate that ‘no referring URL’ is the top referral, which we see as an indicator of the success of the ads in giving us significant name recognition.”

More than half of visitors to the site report getting to the site via links on other Web sites. “The real value of the site is its connections to the groups,” suggests Susan Bales. “When we partner with groups on big efforts like foster care and mental health, when we have deep and broad connections with advocacy groups, we get huge hits on the site. Additionally, the relationships Benton has built with sponsors like Yahoo! have driven enormous traffic to the site.”

The early differences over creative development, campaign officials note, have now been resolved. “The breakthrough came when we realized how to best use an ad agency’s skills,” explained Kirkman. “In the first concepts, we thought the PSAs would have to motivate people or create the context for action. But ad agencies’ strength is selling a product, not changing social attitudes. We realized that the Web site was a product that could engage and equip people to solve problems, that it could inspire action, so the PSAs should simply focus on driving traffic to the site.”

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ACCOMPLISHMENTS

From 1996 through 2000, Connect for Kids received over \$250 million in media exposure, including \$26 million on television. In 1997, the Connect for Kids campaign was the top Ad Council campaign, with media donations in excess of \$100 million, of which \$8.7 million was on television. The current campaign was launched in 1999. In 1999 and 2000, the campaign received \$95 million in exposure, with \$7.5 million of that on television.

Through its partnerships with the Ad Council, AOL Time Warner, and Yahoo!, ConnectforKids.org is one of the leading beneficiaries of donated banner space, with \$4 million in January 2001 alone.

ConnectforKids.org currently averages 712,000 user sessions each month. An internal evaluation of the site indicates that the site is helping to encourage visitors to act on behalf of kids. It reports: “People come to the site searching for information rather than action, but the site has the effect of sparking action. While only one-third credit the site with inspiring them to get involved, a majority actually starts or increases their action for kids within weeks of visiting the site. Furthermore, the site broadens people’s interest in the types of information they desire.”

FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES

Connect for Kids and the Ad Council are currently developing a new campaign in partnership with the National Education Association. Their objective continues to be driving traffic to the site, this time by spotlighting educational issues.

The agency has also suggested finding ways beyond television to engage people with the site, including focusing on schools and teachers. “The agency came up with a great idea to use schools as a direct marketing vehicle,” explains Natkins. “We hope to produce a tool kit for teachers,” adds Garcia. “It would have a series of activities that intersect with parental involvement. We would have PDF files online.” In the week leading up to American Education Week in November, the campaign plans to distribute direct response pieces through schools to promote the site and parental involvement.