



The following questions were posed to Bill Goodwill, CEO, Goodwill Communications, Inc. by a reporter for PR News.

Q: How do you make a PSA - what are the key parameters to think about?

A: *Rule number one in PSA campaign production* is develop a strategic plan to address the entire scope of campaign development, including research, creative strategy, production, distribution and evaluation. PSAs should be produced the same way a commercial product ad is created, except the job is much harder, because instead of trying to sell more product or increase market share, we are normally trying to affect deeply seated public attitudes and behavior.

Perhaps the single most important – and most often neglected – task that should be completed is pre-campaign research. Campaign planners need to learn all they can about three fundamental factors: the problem or behavior that is being addressed via the campaign; the demographics (age, sex, race) and psychographics (lifestyle) of the primary target audience; and finally, what needs to be in the creative message to generate the desired action.

Until this research is complete, there should be no attempt to address the executional aspects of the campaign, i.e. message development, because you don't have all the facts on the problem and audience that will be the focus for the campaign. This is perhaps the single biggest mistake that PSA producers make.

Doing your research homework includes, but is not limited to, direct observation and discussions with your target audience, formalized focus groups, mall intercepts, and baseline attitudinal/behavioral research about the audiences you are trying to reach and influence. Also, good PSA planning includes doing some gatekeeper research – particularly among TV community affairs directors – in terms of their issue priorities, need for localization and other factors that could influence ultimate usage of your PSAs.

Doing your homework also includes learning what works and what doesn't through empirical research. By researching websites on the subject of PSAs, such as the Public Service Advertising Research Center at <http://psaresearch.com> producers can learn a lot about effectiveness on someone else's dime.

Rule two would be to hire experienced producers. Producing a PSA campaign is unlike any other production assignment. It is a specialized craft, and because the producer will not be in control of the message timing and placement, there are unique skills required to develop PSA messages that have impact.

The third thing to think about when producing a PSA campaign is that ***it should have a broad scope.*** A TV spot is not a campaign, nor is a print ad; they are executions. To produce a "campaign," you must target all media – TV, (including cable), radio and outdoor – at a minimum, because each medium has different strengths and weaknesses in terms of reaching your primary audience. Also, by using a multi-media approach, you increase the chances of reinforcing your message via different approaches in different media.

Finally, when producing your PSA, ***adopt a team approach*** by bringing all the people who will be involved in the campaign to the table in the planning stage. This doesn't mean writing copy by committee, which normally results in disaster. It means that those who will be involved in various executional aspects of the campaign understand the objectives, audiences, timing, distribution and measurement details of the effort.

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It is foolhardy, for example, for the creative people not to understand evaluation factors for PSAs – what spot lengths the media find most useful, what topics are being aired, what time of the year is best to distribute. Developing a PSA campaign in a void, without all the advice and strategies of the key players, is a formula for failure. As for adverse parameters, most of these are addressed under the 10 things to avoid when producing a PSA, but there are a few generalities.

The first of these is to ***avoid controversy like the plague***, particularly in television. Subjects that come to mind are gun control, abortion, religious dogma and using scare tactics in creative executions. Television stations spend millions of dollars to develop a franchise with their viewers based largely on trust, credibility and service. They are not about to risk that franchise by airing PSAs that will flood their switchboards with complaints from viewers.

This is not to say that PSAs must be benign; you can still address important, topical issues, but you must use caution and lean towards conservatism in your approach. For more guidance on what to include or exclude in your creative approach, read the article: <http://networkclearance.html>

Choosing a celebrity for your campaign also has its pros and cons. The good news is that the public typically reacts very favorably to celebrity spokespersons, but that can be the bad news as well. Research shows that when using celebrities in PSAs, many people remember the celebrity and forget the message. Also, if the celebrity is currently airing on a particular TV network show, competing networks, and their affiliates will normally not use the PSAs, for obvious reasons.

Using a celebrity spokesperson can have ethical or moral negatives. For example, how would you like to have spent your valuable production resources on a TV PSA featuring Robert Downey, Jr. just before he was arrested for drug abuse?

Finally - and there is often a fine line that needs to be addressed here - it is important to ***avoid "scare tactics"*** in PSA development. What is "scary" or "gruesome" to one person may be completely different to another. However, the point is the media gatekeepers will, to a large extent, define that for you. If, for example, you develop a TV PSA that shows very explicit scenes of a highway crash, or a person who has had extensive facial surgery due to skin cancer, you may have passed the focus group test, but lost the media battle for airtime because the public service director feels it is too explicit or controversial.

Q: What Makes a Great PSA?

A: While "great" is one of the most overused adjectives in the English language, subject to interpretation by a variety of "experts," there are certain qualities that make a "very good" PSA that most of us would agree on.

To be effective, broadcast PSAs should be relevant to their audience, interesting or entertaining and leave the audience with a message that can be summarized in a single declarative sentence. Most importantly, the message should be actionable, meaning we evoke the desired response from the audience, and there should be a required response. Good PSAs move the audience or viewer along in a continuum that ultimately results in attitude or behavior changes (though not due only to PSAs).

Many very good PSAs are empathetic, meaning they build trust with their audience, or a sense of caring about a problem. Many outstanding PSAs are simple in their execution, mostly photos in a print ad or white type reversed out of a black screen for TV. They need not be expensive, but they do need a tremendous amount of thought and research.

Good PSAs are executable in all media and they use the same theme or graphic approaches in all media. Good PSAs provide a buy-in for the media – a method for the media to “get credit” for airing the PSA or running the ad. Good TV PSAs use the strengths of TV to their advantage – full use of color, motion and sound – to register their message.

Good radio is good TV without the pictures...evoking a mental picture of the subject through the use of sound effects and a strong, credible spokesperson.

Good outdoor is great photography or art, few words and outstanding design. And finally, good PSAs recognize that one size does not fit all media outlets; PSAs must be tailored to TV, radio and outdoor, using the inherent strengths that each medium provides in the overall mix.

Q: What Makes a Bad PSA?

A: Bad PSAs are those that reflect poor planning and execution. Promoting an issue that is not important, a subject that is irrelevant to mainstream Americans, or an issue that is too controversial for the media to use.

Bad PSAs are those with a self-serving message; they benefit the non-profit, but few others, and least of all the media who are providing the time and space pro-bono. Bad PSAs are those that are poorly designed and produced; those that fail to take each medium’s unique needs into consideration.

Bad PSAs result when you fail to consider what the media wants, not what you can afford to send them because it is cheaper to produce. Bad PSAs try to get too much message into too little space and time. Bad PSAs fail to recognize that PSAs are not going to change the world; they are but a single arrow in a quiver full of communications tools.

Bad PSAs are distributed without a plan or a clue in terms of the audience we are trying to reach and what media we are targeting with our message. “There is money in our budget to do a PSA, and we are going to get one out this quarter. - We have only enough for a radio spot, so that’s what we’ll produce,” usually results in a bad PSA, or certainly a bad PSA “program.”

Bad PSAs result from hiring inexperienced producers and ad agencies that don’t have a clue as to how to produce PSAs, or how they differ from commercial productions. They result from producers who don’t understand that attitude and behavior change are not going to occur in the near term.

Not only do these “experts” not know about PSAs, they won’t admit that they don’t know what they don’t know. They produce PSAs just like they produce award-winning product commercials and expect them to work the same way. They don’t, and since they probably don’t evaluate campaign impact either, no one may ever know.

Q: How Effective Can a PSA Be?

A: “Effective,” like the word “great,” means different things to different people. To us, as distributors and evaluators, effective means do they offer a reasonable cost/benefit payback or return on investment.? And, do they accomplish their objective, in terms of public action? The latter assumes that this was one of the campaign goals in the first place, which is not always the case. But it should be.

In terms of cost-benefit payback, on average, our current client campaigns generate \$5 million in multi-media support, on average, depending upon the type of media used, the number of outlets targeted, and how long we track the campaign. We have one campaign, comprised of just broadcast/cable TV and radio, that generated in excess of \$90 million for a comparatively modest production cost.

The second way to define “effective” is by measuring public reaction, and here the data is harder to come by because many PSAs have no call to action, or if they have one, the producers do not tally responses. However, there is some evidence that PSAs can be highly effective in getting the public to take specific action as a result of PSA exposure.

A teen alcoholism PSA campaign, for example, drew more than 76,000 calls to an 800 number that provided information on local referral centers. According to a study on those who called the “hope” line, 62 percent of callers took further action, including confronting a problem drinker. More than 30,000 of the callers were referred to local treatment centers or to state substance abuse agencies.

In another case study of PSA effectiveness, an American Red Cross campaign “Play Your Part,” recruited 30,000 volunteers in one month, 14,000 of whom were from the 18-34 year old target audience. If you go to: www.psaresearch.com/bib4401.html you will see an article that tells how PSAs can perform various communications functions.

Q: What Are 10 Dos for PSAs?

1. Research, research, research. Do pre-campaign research on your audience, their interests and motivations; do research among the media to determine their wants and needs, and do on-going research to determine if you are meeting your campaign objectives. Consult the Public Advertising Research Center at <http://psaresearch.com>, a free on-line website to help non-profits learn the dos and don’ts of this specialized field.

2. Develop a strategic plan which outlines in detail what you intend to accomplish via your campaign, the tactics you intend to employ to accomplish your goals; set realistic budgets and plan for optimal timing in terms of implementation.
3. Hire a team with experience in producing PSAs to create your campaign.
4. Produce a campaign that is multi-media in scope and one that uses the different inherent advantages of media.
5. Offer maximum flexibility in terms of formats, sizes and lengths. This means sending the media what they want and can use (appropriate video and audio formats), different spot lengths (a broad mixture as well as live and pre-recorded messages for radio) and print ads screened differently for magazines and newspapers.
6. Produce minority materials. Remember our society is diverse in its composition and that Hispanic outlets need Spanish language material; African-American outlets are hesitant to use PSAs with minimal African-American involvement.
7. Keep the message simple, clear and concise; offer a call to action such as write for a piece of literature or call a phone number. If you use these techniques, plan to have an appropriate amount of literature available and the fulfillment mechanism in place before you release your campaign. Send media samples of your literature to help involve them in your campaign.
8. Aggressively promote your campaign via blast emails, direct mail, telemarketing or any other tactic to get the attention of the media and let them know where they can download your PSAs.
9. Develop a solid distribution plan and a rationale for media selection that is based upon previous PSA usage patterns of all the media that are included in your plan.
10. Find ways to involve the media in your campaign including participation in special community events, local tagging of PSAs, personalized letters to gatekeepers, and other forms of station participation to create what is known as “total station projects,” instead of just PSAs. And, very importantly, don’t forget to say thank you to the media which run your PSAs or publish your print ads.

Q: What Are 10 Don’ts for PSAs?

1. Don’t create “a campaign” that is based on a single execution in a single medium. Don’t try to change behavior or attitudes with a single spot or campaign; don’t try to cram too much information into a single broadcast spot or print ad.
2. Don’t use PSAs to try and get exposure for a controversial issues such as gun control, and be very careful of using scare tactics or any approach that will make the broadcaster think twice about using your message on the air.
3. Don’t produce PSAs based on the ‘one size fits all’ strategy; send the media the sizes and formats they want and can use.

4. Don't use a "talking head" in a TV PSA unless the person is incredibly powerful; don't neglect the fact that radio wants something more than a lift of the TV spot and that many stations will use only live announcer copy.
5. Don't forget to include your distributor and/or evaluator in pre-campaign planning sessions. They can share tips and trend data on what works and can help you maximize effectiveness.
6. Don't distribute PSAs during the wrong time of the year such as the post-Thanksgiving holidays when PSA airtime is very scarce. Look for special events that you can use to tie into such as National High Blood Pressure Week.
7. If you are using famous personalities in your campaign, don't use those that are out of character or context with your campaign just because they are famous. Look for those whose public persona is consistent with your message or campaign objective.
8. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. PSAs are not a panacea. They are a single communications tool and need to be supported by other forms of mass communications such as publicity, community outreach, special events, etc.
9. Don't overlook your field operatives such as local public affairs staff. They should be an important part of campaign planning, program development and post-campaign follow-up.
10. Don't collect evaluation data just for the sake of impressing your boss, the accounting department or your board of directors. Evaluation data should be "actionable," meaning you should use it to fine-tune subsequent campaign strategy and change tactics based on databased decision-making.