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“Hey Gang, Let’s Put on a Show!”

For many years, the U.S. government broadcast anticommunist propaganda toward Cuba, while Fidel Castro’s government transmitted interfering signals on the same frequencies so Cubans could not hear the programs. The Cuban transmitters also caused reception problems for audiences of some U.S. commercial radio stations. Both sides in this expensive transmitter war believed that if the American broadcasts got through, Castro’s supporters would turn on him, forcing the island nation to become a capitalistic and democratic society.

When I was a faculty member at Penn State, John, a colleague of mine, wrote an article pointing out that this radio-TV battle was wasting money. Even if everyone in Cuba heard the messages, no one would be “converted.” Radio programs would not turn communists into capitalists any more readily than Tokyo Rose demoralized allied soldiers in World War II and convinced them to surrender. John’s article applied basic communications theory; his conclusions were intuitively obvious to anyone who had studied how advertising and marketing worked. But he still got a phone call from someone in the federal government who insisted that the article was wrong. To the caller, it was equally “obvious” that if the U.S. broadcasts got through the Cubans’ jamming, the programs would cause a public insurrection in the island nation.

After some lengthy and intense discussion, John called out to the faculty talking in the hallway, asking us to step into his office. With his hand over the mouthpiece, he quickly told us of his frustration and handed the phone to Vince. Our senior colleague was initially polite, but he reached his tolerance level more quickly than John.

"Young man," Vince asked, with the probing intensity I had seen him exhibit with a less-than-sharp student, "how much advertising would convince you to wear a dress to work?"

I imagined the caller's reaction as he gave a puzzled shrug of his shoulders, "A lot, I guess."

"So if you see a lot of advertising with men modeling dresses, you'd wear one?"
"I guess."

"Calf-high or floor length? Strapless? Maybe with a pair of spike-heeled shoes?"

"Hey, what kind of guy do you think I am?"

"I have no idea," Vince calmly replied. "But whatever type of man you think wears that outfit, you're the person who said you'd become one with exposure to enough advertising."

In effect, most public service advertising campaigns try to convince traditional conservative men to wear women's clothes.

Many people believe advertising has magical powers that it does not possess, and advertising practitioners feed these mistaken beliefs by spouting all sorts of nonsense.

Just as advertising people like to claim the power to move products, they also claim an equally great ability to move the public mind in "selling" various social goals. But such claims depend on a logical non sequitur, conclusions that do not follow from the initial premise. Just because advertising sometimes can help generate consumer interest in specific brand names does not also mean that every advertised effort will get people to make significant changes in their behavior. There are numerous pragmatic differences between selling brand-name products or services and convincing people to change the way they live their lives.

An advertising campaign that aims to serve a social goal faces many pragmatic obstacles. The obstacles are so great and the problems so numerous that money spent on advertising would often be better used on other activities, such as law enforcement or personal counseling with the people who are most at risk.

But the greatest problem is that the decision makers who control and direct the public interest campaigns do not understand the most basic of marketing perspectives. They have no expertise on using marketing tools. They do not misplace marketing by losing it, since they

never bothered to learn it in the first place. They are medical doctors or rape counselors or political workers who nonetheless see themselves as marketing or advertising "experts." Since these public-spirited men and women think they "know" what the people in the at-risk groups need, marketing questions are not even asked.

And they *believe* in the power of advertising.

NEVER MIND THE QUESTION, ADVERTISING IS THE ANSWER

A huge color picture of a new billboard in town filled a newspaper's front page. The main story's headline proclaimed, "Rape problem now being addressed," and the article told readers that the outdoor display was a major element in a solution to the problem of date rape. Apparently aimed at men who might become rapists, it said that a woman's statement of *no* means no.

The local rape counseling group that sponsored the advertisement was confident that billboards like this would help raise public awareness and, in turn, reduce the number of rape incidents in the local college community. And, apparently, the newspaper reporter agreed.¹

Rape is one of many social problems whose solution is seen as an advertising campaign. Government and public service agencies concerned about drunk driving, road rage, unsafe sexual practices, underage cigarette smoking, illegal drug use, and even littering all expect advertising to reduce the incidence of these not-infrequent, socially undesirable activities.

The rape awareness billboard violated every textbook rule on how to write, illustrate and display effective outdoor advertising. It had too many words (four complete sentences), weak and confused graphics (a pair of intertwined hands, explained by the sentences saying, "He's not holding her hand. He's holding her down"), and multiple messages. But despite these technical problems, the display was important for reducing rape, or so the counseling group believed. In part, the news story revealed that the sponsors possessed a certain arrogance, and they should have gotten some help from advertising professionals. Or maybe they had professional help that was less than competent.

In any event, badly done advertising was the focus of Chapter 4, not here. Some public service advertising campaigns are well produced. The best of them win awards from advertising business leaders and trade groups. But even if the rape counselors had produced a technically good billboard for their message, there would still exist a valid question of whether *any* advertising effort could have an impact on rapists or their friends.

Rape is a violent criminal act. Advertising does not turn criminals into law-abiding people any more than speed limit signs get motorists to slow down. Date rape involves an act of force by a man whose mind is incapable of overruling his hormones. It is doubtful that any form of mass communications can inculcate the sensitivity needed to make any change in a rapist's behavior, any more than rapists could be persuaded by advertising to wear the victim's evening gown the next day.

The real problem with this campaign and many others like it is that even with well-written advertising and an "award-winning" production, the same basic marketing question is overlooked, as it was here. No one asks whether mass media advertising can persuade anyone to change their "problem" behaviors. Usually, it can't. Success for an advertised brand merely involves convincing a small, already predisposed percentage of the population to try or use it, while social campaigns need to persuade larger numbers of people who are fully aware of what they are doing and have decided to ignore the risks. Business people know that not every product needs or uses advertising to be sold; some products can't be sold no matter how much they are advertised.

For most public service advertising campaigns, not only is this basic question not asked, but it is not even considered. The power of advertising is presumed, and the people behind most public service campaigns see the advertising itself as a solution.

Of course, such a misconception and misuse of advertising is not reserved for people supporting a social cause. Business trade associations or political action groups also see advertising as the solution to all sorts of problems.

Many farmers pay an annual fee to national or regional associations to fund advertising campaigns to encourage generic demand for items such as beef, milk, orange juice, or prunes. Like many other towns, Niles, Illinois, launched an advertising campaign to encourage residents to shop at local stores instead of using the Internet. Political or opinion advertising campaigns are an expected aspect of the diversity of public dialog: Unions fund advertising to support boycotts of opponent manufacturers; groups such as Citizens Concerned for Human Life broadcast television and radio commercials to discourage abortions.

In each instance, the dues-paying or donation-making backers of these organizations feel good when they see or hear advertising that fits with their views. So while nothing pragmatic is accomplished from a marketing point of view, the messages serve the emotional needs of the advertisers. Money is wasted, or, at the very least, spent in a less-than-optimal fashion, but no one really cares.

Arguably, this ineffectual advertising sometimes yields an intellectual "benefit," even if no one's attitude is changed, when it engenders public debate on an important issue. For example, a hard-hitting, pro-

ethanasia television commercial in Australia generated numerous news stories about the woman it featured. Many people prefer to avoid dealing with that topic, but the advertising forced public debate. And the television commercial stimulus would appear to be a more desirable and less destructive way to get discussion going than Dr. Jack Kervorkian's law-violating assisted suicides in the United States that are followed by his daring the various states' prosecutors to bring him to trial.

In San Francisco, billboards and bus shelter ads showed seductive-looking models, photographed in the style of Victoria's Secret advertising, their uncovered chests revealing scars where their breasts used to be. One billboard company pulled down the ads as "offensive to community standards"; a second firm agreed to run them for free. But the controversy over whether the ads should stay or go from the public space caused publicity that was the core of the Breast Cancer Fund's goal. The advertising's existence (if not the messages) generated national news attention and greater awareness of breast cancer among young women.²

But these are not the usual cases. More commonly, the goal is not "discussion" but changing actual public behaviors by which people place themselves or others at risk.

Optimally, public interest advertising campaigns need to consider in advance what the advertising would or could accomplish. Most often they don't. The Breast Cancer Fund had a detailed advertising plan, with a clear perspective: Forcing women to see breast cancer as a real and personal threat would impel them to more readily conduct self-exams and have regular check-ups. The style of the display and the blizzard of publicity met those goals. But that organization's approach is the exception. It is more common that advertising is employed for the indefinite and less-than-pragmatic aim of "doing something."

BUT CAN ADVERTISING DO ANYTHING?

Advertising is seen as the solution for schools needing funds or students. Because New Zealand parents have full school choice—children are no longer required to attend neighborhood schools—the schools must attract students to get attendance-based government reimbursements. Almost all of the local schools are now advertising, facing public criticism for spending money in this fashion and not knowing how or why it might attract students. The administration of the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, facing budget problems and a slight enrollment decline, decided to start advertising even before it was fully understood just why more students would wish to attend there. Similarly, back home, faced with tight

funding from the state legislature, Auburn University launched an image advertising campaign, though the target was uncertain, the goals were amorphous (tell them we are a wonderful school?), and the resulting advertising appeared to many students, faculty and alumni to be poorly conceived and executed.

Teenaged drivers throughout the United States joke about how many "points" they get for hitting various types of pedestrians, but San Francisco pedestrians must feel like they really are targets in a game. They are injured and killed at an epidemic rate at intersections and in crosswalks. As various possible solutions are discussed, some groups want to put an emphasis on advertising, telling local drivers to look out for pedestrians at intersections. While the news reports are filled with increasingly common reports of pedestrians hit by cars, one wonders what advertising could tell motorists that they don't already know. The potential creator of the campaign told reporters that he wanted people approaching intersections to think and slow down, not mentioning that the drivers who cause the accidents are speeding, running through red lights, and ignoring crosswalk signs. In Auburn, a nineteen-year-old drove around a stopped school bus, killing a small child. Advertising would not have had any impact on this young man who was too rushed to be concerned with obeying the law.³

Aggressive driving, now commonly known as "road rage," has become another major traffic problem in the United States. And like other such problems, advertising messages have appeared to address the problem. Of course, there is more to solving the problem than telling people, "Excuse me, but I think you're acting like a jerk." The basic question is whether aggressive or angry drivers would recognize or admit that they are a hazard to themselves and others on the road.

Two television commercials a couple years ago tried to point out the stupidity of the aggressive driver without ever showing the car. In one, to the sounds of revving engines, two male pedestrians take the measure of each other and then aggressively "race" across the street. (They are in the crosswalk and obeying the traffic light, which is more law obedience than is shown by some aggressive drivers.) In the other, two people with baby strollers start an increasingly fast and reckless race, ending with a crash into a innocent bystander. The message is clear and the statement is creative, but the commercials probably will not change anyone's behavior. People who recognize other drivers in the message will slap the table, laugh, and point it out to friends. And the jerks who are aggressive drivers will watch it, slap the table, laugh, and point it out to friends, too, because, . . . well, they're jerks.

It is a classic scene in movies and television. "Excuse me," says the hero, "I think the woman said she wanted to be left alone." Whether the hero is John Wayne, Gary Cooper, or Chuck Norris, the obnoxious

guy does not walk away, but instead, draws a gun or swings a fist. If the "hero" is Jerry Seinfeld or Tim Allen, we expect the jerk to still start a fight, but the star will escape the brawl by hiding under a table. To most people in the audience, the man causing the problem is very realistic, so knowing we can't fight or depend on luck, most of us pray we're never trapped in that position.

In real life, as a jaywalker finishes crossing the street, the impatient motorist honks the horn. The pedestrian thinks the driver is a childish jerk and the driver is thinking the same thing about the pedestrian.

The Outdoor Advertising Association of American (OAAA) has unveiled its new effort to combat road rage. The copy says "Give your fellow drivers the finger," with a picture of an enlarged head and arm sticking out of a car with a thumbs up gesture. Next to the thumb is a balloon saying "Drive nice." I guess this makes the OAAA people proud that they are doing something to address the problem. With the advertising space donated by the organization's members, they are not drawing any public money from law enforcement or other driver education activities. But as tactics without strategy and advertising that lacks a meaningful target audience that can be persuaded, it is doubtful that anything will be accomplished by the billboards.

THE LIMITS OF BUSINESSES' PUBLIC SERVICE

During World War II, American advertising practitioners volunteered their efforts, and media vehicles gave free time and space, to help stir up patriotic fervor and to sell war bonds. After the war ended, the War Advertising Council organization renamed itself the Advertising Council, "dedicated to using the great resources of the advertising industry" to serve the public interest. It is now the largest producer of public service mass communications campaigns in the United States. Donations of work time by advertising agencies, plus the donations of time and space by the media vehicles for the messages, have been estimated to be worth around a billion dollars per year.

Free public service work from anyone is admirable, and the Advertising Council's dedication to public service is a wonderful credit to business groups supporting it. But advertising agencies that provide this professional "help" are also trying to build their own portfolio of award-winning advertising; the campaigns have a value for agencies as a showcase for a company's creative work. The problem is that copywriters and art directors, eager to produce new "breakout advertising," will concentrate on the creative advertising and not the public interest they are trying to serve.

So while the creative people involved with these campaigns face the usual distractions described in Chapter 4, the pro bono nature of

the work means their *only* incentive is to produce a creative showcase. Without a requirement for them to show actual impact or success, there do not have a strong incentive to think in terms of consumer perspectives or values. As a result, the advertising might be interesting and attention getting while still misplacing the basic marketing questions.

Not all Advertising Council campaigns have been unsuccessful. Some have helped change the public's perceptual agenda, or so we are told. The council's famous campaign featuring Smokey the Bear saying, "Only *you* can prevent forest fires" is credited with reducing the incidence of human-caused conflagrations. At the very least, people today are more conscious of things that cause fires than they were when the campaign began. An award-winning television commercial featuring a Native American with a tear on his cheek as he views trash on the landscape is commonly believed to have played a major role in changing people's views about littering, which, in turn, reduced the number of motorists who toss garbage out the car windows while driving down the road.

Yet these well-known claims of success are noteworthy as exceptions as well as being exceptional. An extensive body of literature concludes that most public information campaigns fail to alter the behaviors of people who are the source of the problem. Even when the campaigns emphasize issues of the audience's personal health or safety, and even though there might exist some evidence that people are aware of the PSA's message content, the target group's "dangerous" behaviors usually remain unaltered.⁴ And some claims of advertising success could just as readily be attributed to other factors that occurred at the same time.

If nothing changes, no one asserts that the advertising might have been a wasted effort. And if there is a change in public behaviors, the advertising is given credit. For example, the television spots of the "crying Indian"⁵ were shown during a period of increased enforcement of antilittering laws (with larger fines for violators and roadside notices of the law), while stores distributed free litter bags for cars and more roadside rest areas had garbage bins. While littering might have gone down during this time, it is uncertain whether it was the advertising that caused the drop. Similarly, safe driving advertising campaigns usually begin while police concurrently intensify their enforcement of traffic laws.

Beyond the strategic myopia of some public service campaigns, there are some barriers to success. The problems are outside the control of any marketing people involved with the effort, and the reliance on media owner's largess is an intrinsic problem of misplaced marketing.

Many U.S. ad campaigns run their course with few people ever knowing they existed, running their entire span with few target con-

sumers ever seeing the commercials. Since the Advertising Council and other groups depend on time or space donated by the media for Public Service Announcements (PSAs), they take the placements they can get for free without question. No one is in a position to make certain the free media placements reach the intended audience.

While the advertising associations claim that donated time and space are worth millions of dollars each year, their estimates are a tad bogus. For almost every vehicle, and especially with radio and television spots, PSAs tend to be used as time or space "fillers" for slots that would otherwise go unsold. As something no one wants to buy, the real market value is zero. And the times when the commercials run reflect this.

Some broadcasters claim to run a large number of commercials in support of specific campaigns, but the spots tend to appear in late night or other fringe periods. Under even the best PSA schedules with the greatest number of spots, a review found the commercials reaching a small percentage of total households, and even this small audience might not have been the people desired for the campaigns.⁶ And if no one sees the message, there are serious doubts as to whether most of these campaigns possess hope of accomplishing anything, meaning that their only "value" is to the people producing them.

In an old joke, a minister's funeral prayer is repeatedly interrupted by an old Jewish woman who repeatedly yells, "Give him some chicken soup! Give him some chicken soup." The minister finally responds in measured tones, saying, "Madam, it's too late. It wouldn't help." "Well," she says with some thought, "it wouldn't hurt."

It could be argued that with PSAs, the time or space is donated, so there is no harm. It wouldn't hurt. Advertising agencies, producers, and media groups use these donated commercial productions as examples of their high-quality work; they meet high production standards, often win creative awards and are proudly included as part of an agency's work resumé. The public can't tell the difference between these donated commercials and those that are produced or placed as part of a purchased effort.

On the other hand, even with donated media time and space, there are still costs involved. And not all public interest advertising campaigns are PSAs. In other countries that lack the traditions of the U.S. Advertising Council, the advertising-based campaigns draw on government tax funds or limited resources of a public group. Even in the United States, many new campaigns purchase media time and space, hiring salaried advertising professionals to write, produce, or buy the time and space for the ads. These funded efforts might have better executed tactics, but the budgets are still limited. It is difficult to place the messages where they can be seen or heard by the targeted audiences often enough to have any persuasive power.

And even when spending millions of dollars of government funds or donated money from public interest groups, the efforts to change public behaviors often have a misplaced overreliance on advertising.

So they do "hurt." Sick people become dead people when they rely on alternative medicines instead of seeing a doctor. Similarly, public service advertising makes people feel good by giving the impression that something is being done, but other options are ignored while no one does the work that would better reach and persuade people who are at risk. And since total funds to deal with the problem are finite, ineffective advertising draws money from other activities.

THE BLOODY IDIOTS BEHIND THE WHEEL

Starting in 1989, Australia's Traffic Accident Commission in Victoria undertook an intensive paid advertising campaign to encourage safe driving practices; the New Zealand Land Transport Safety Authority started a similar advertising effort in 1995. However, while the Australian campaign claimed success with a concurrent reduction in the number of highway accidents and fatalities, the New Zealand effort was unable to make comparable claims, with at least one academic study noting that any link between the campaign and changes in the New Zealand road toll to be tenuous at best.⁷

The probable reasons for the difference provide a strong example of misplaced faith in the power of advertising to change behaviors. The Australian advertising was probably not as successful as they claimed, and definitely not for the reasons the Victorian government wanted to believe.

In both countries, the publicly funded ads used intense images to appeal to the drivers' fears, showing both gory outcomes from not getting enough rest, driving at excessive speeds, driving drunk or failing to wear seat belts. Death and disabling injuries were shown in graphic detail with a slogan, "If you [don't wear a seat belt; drink and then drive; drive too fast; etc.], you're a bloody idiot."

A young woman who loosened her seat belt to whisper to her boyfriend goes flying through the windshield and then, weeks later, is crying as her maimed and disfigured body fights through physical therapy. The speeding and boisterous crew of youngsters zooms through a stop sign and gets hit by a truck, ending with scenes of survivors screaming and crying over their friends' bodies. The sleepy driver flies off the road and wraps his car around a tree. The drunk teen is goofing off while driving, has a terrible smash-up with a truck, and, later, on his back in the hospital with his head and body in a brace, he cries, "I killed my brother!" who was the passenger. A group of drunken young people roll the car off the road, laughing all the

way, but as the still-laughing driver crawls free of the wreckage that trapped his friends, the car bursts into flames as viewers watch and hear (along with the driver) the death screams of the passengers. A New Zealand print ad shows a young and generally fit-looking man in near-fetal position in a wheelchair, while the copy at the side only says, "If you drink then drive, you're a bloody idiot," indicating that drunk driving is what put him in such a sorry position.

Comparable advertising efforts have been undertaken in the United States, though they have tended to avoid portrayals of such extreme and intensely graphic accident outcomes.⁸ Still, while the U.S. non-government sponsors are proud of the advertising work, the actual impact on driving practices is questionable and uncertain.

In all instances, government or public interest groups presume they have done the job if their supporters believe that more people are generally "thinking" about safety. But since money for improving traffic conditions and reducing road fatalities is finite, advertising spending logically reduces funding for other activities, such as enforcement of traffic laws.

And therein lies the basic difference between the campaigns in New Zealand and Australia, and why any U.S. campaign would have limited impact.

In Australia, the advertising campaign coincided with increased enforcement of relevant laws. Hidden speed cameras photographed and ticketed the fast-moving drivers. Traffic would be stopped at almost any time or location where police-owned trailers, called "booze buses," would test all motorists and all drivers who were drunk faced immediate arrest and loss of their license. Laws requiring seat belts are strictly enforced, with unbuckled passengers and drivers getting tickets for violations.⁹ It should be intuitively obvious that once young drivers see tickets, fines and other penalties as a very likely outcome for their unsafe driving, they will change their behavior.

This logically explains the difference between the Australian experience and that in New Zealand and the United States. In New Zealand, the traffic stops by booze buses are restricted to certain areas or times of the week and, apparently, they are easy to avoid. New Zealand speed cameras are tied to warning signs, saying the driver is entering a "speed camera area." I even saw signs saying, "You are leaving the speed camera area." And being caught by a speed camera in New Zealand only means a fine without any points against a driver's record. In the United States, radar detectors are legal in all except two states and police often must chase and catch individual speeders one at a time, making traffic violations a cat-and-mouse game for motorists. Australian limits for blood alcohol are lower than those in the United States, and U.S. police spot checks for drunk drivers are rare; license revocations or suspensions are even rarer.

By the Traffic Accident Council's own data, road deaths and injuries in Victoria, Australia, were generally declining from a high in 1970 even before the "successful" advertising campaign started. With the newly increased enforcement efforts undertaken at the same time as the advertising, there was a major immediate drop, but that had leveled off by 1992. In 1999, a discussion of new measures to encourage further drops listed many efforts or programs—lower speed limits on residential streets; alcohol ignition interlock devices; safety programs to improve roads or car features—but conspicuous by its absence was any mention of new advertising.

APPEALS TO FEAR

If some people can be persuaded by mass media messages, then decision makers should first ask who these people are and why they would change their behaviors before deciding what or how to advertise. If these questions aren't asked, useless advertising results. And the same intrinsic misplaced marketing problem of section I also applies to public service advertising campaigns: what the target audience considers important may be vastly different from what the people making the messages consider important.

Good advertising requires a recognition that the audience's motives are rarely the same as what the decision makers presume, but public health officials are very reluctant to admit this. Not having the time, money, or inclination to conduct research, mistaken of impressions of how people think make for misdirected messages.

There might exist a group of drivers in every country that could be persuaded by advertising to drive safely. And if this is true, they might change their behavior out of a fear of what could happen if they do something unsafe. But, first and foremost, ads need to appeal to something that the drivers consider important.

Logically, people would not do things that are self-destructive. No sane person wants to die. Yet showing threats of death and injury from reckless driving do not seem to have much impact on young motorists. Either they do not fear death or they do not see the accident as something that could happen to them. Unfortunately, even when business professionals design public health campaigns, mythology about how an audience thinks has come to outweigh insight. Sometimes the advertising people are not much better "experts" on this than the public health officials.

Many years ago, in the hallway outside a government agency's hearing on advertising regulation issues, a staff member repeated to me a statement found in many marketing textbooks, that there is "an optimum level of fear" for audience persuasion. In reference to the above

road safety cases, this would mean that the New Zealand advertising messages were too strong and gory, not hitting on the audience's "optimal level of fear" for persuasion. Of course, the agency staffer was not talking about public safety campaigns. Instead, he was making what he thought was a valid point, based on his belief that audience-manipulating marketing people know exactly where that optimal point is located.

He was trying to tell me why he personally disliked any use of fear to sell products, calling it "consumer manipulation," but his stated belief triggered several skeptical reactions on my part. While I had also read the textbook assertions of this optimal persuasion point, I doubted that the marketing professionals were so sagacious as to intuitively divine where it might be located. If he were correct, advertising copywriters could always tell what types of campaigns worked best for any audience, something I knew to be false. Curious, I started my own review of the extensive literature on mass communications appeals to audience fears.

The academic literature mostly traces its origins to two psychological studies almost five decades ago. Groups of subjects were presented with different versions of an illustrated lecture on dental hygiene and each version stated a different degree of harm that could be an outcome of dental neglect. In the studies, what the researchers designated as the weaker "fear appeals"—though (as I will explain shortly) it should be more appropriately called "weaker threats" or "appeals to audience fears"—were more effective in getting high school students to adopt the recommended tooth-care procedures.¹⁰

In an almost offhand comment attempting to explain the results, the authors speculated that there might exist "an optimal level of fear" for audience persuasion. This comment has formed at least a partial basis for most marketing research in the following decades and, to this date, most new academic studies published in marketing journals start by stating either that there is some (unknown) "optimal level of fear" to maximize persuasion power, or, after citing two or three journal articles from the many hundreds published since 1952, simply state that past research data are "mixed" in support of the existence of a moderate amount of fear being optimal for consumer persuasion.

One would think that if the data are repeatedly "mixed" after decades of data collection, the theory would be discarded as unsupported. Instead, marketing researchers elevated the concept of an "optimal level fear" to that of dogma.¹¹ In any event, the advertising managers are not as all-knowing as their clients would like to think. As a result of advertisers' arrogance and their clients' trust, they both end up almost clueless as to what the audience really fears or why. Instead, they base the advertising on their own fears.

In addition, they fail to make a basic distinction between threats and fear. And this problem gets even worse with various public health advertising efforts to encourage safe driving, discourage cigarette smoking, or promote safe sexual activities.

Threats illustrate undesirable consequences from certain behaviors, such as damage to a car, bodily injury, or death from unsafe driving, or bad breath, breathing problems, or cancer from cigarette smoking. However, fear is an emotional response to threats, and different people fear different things. No threat evokes the same response from all people. A threat is an appeal to fear, a message that attempts to evoke a fear response by showing some type of outcome that the members of the audience might want to avoid. Fear is an actual emotional response that might prompt changes in a person's attitude or behaviors.

Research has consistently found that the strongest persuasive power comes from telling the audience how to avoid the outcome it fears the most. Many literature reviews and meta-analysis of past research data have shown that the greater the actual fear engendered by a communication, the greater the persuasion.¹² But strong threats do not necessarily evoke strong fear responses with all possible audiences because different people fear different things. The strongest, goriest, or most deadly outcomes might not be readily feared.

MINOR SIDETRACK: AUDIENCE SEGMENTATION

The distinction between threats and audience fears also shows how a basic tool for marketing planning, namely, audience segmentation, is misplaced and otherwise lost in public health advertising campaigns.

The term "market segmentation" has been mentioned enough in the popular press or television news that it has entered the general consciousness: marketing efforts target specific groups by offering certain product features or advertised benefits that the group is expected to prefer. What is often misunderstood, however, is that no segment's response is a certainty. A defined market or audience segment is, at best, a probability. The people fitting the definition are more likely to respond in an expected or desired fashion than people who do not belong to that group. Some people inside the segment might not respond as expected; some people outside the group will respond favorably to things not "aimed" at them. In other words, there only exists an increased likelihood that members of market segments will respond in the expected fashion.

The segment itself is not something intrinsic in a person. A segment is a collection of data that describes commonalities found in groups of people.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of data used to define segments: (1) demographic data, such as age, gender, race, or income,

which comprise a physical description of a person or group; and (2) various forms of psychological or "mental" data, such as lifestyles, attitudes or beliefs, that give more detailed descriptions of how people think. Logically, mental data are better predictors of how people think or act than a physical description of who they are. There are many demographic similarities between President Reagan's daughter Maureen and Jane Fonda, for example, or between Al Gore and George W. Bush, but no one would dare assert that these pairs are psychologically the same person. And yet, when discussing audiences of public interest campaigns, the physical data are presented as determinant and other inputs often ignored.

The advertiser's primary use of demographic data is in buying media time or space, since that is how the mass media define their audiences. Mostly because of the prohibitive expense and difficulty involved in gathering more information, the makeup of audiences of a television program, radio station, cable network, or newspaper are provided to advertisers with little insight beyond broad demographic characteristics. However, since an advertising campaign is trying to inform and persuade a target audience, the crucial data indicate how people think. The psychological data tell this story, not the demographic.

And therein lies the real problem with public health campaigns for traffic safety, AIDS prevention, or antismoking efforts that appeal to audience fears. The ads are written from what the advertising writers fear, or they simply presume that death and destruction is a most-feared outcome. They show young people in the ads, but they do not really think in terms of threats that the targeted young people could or would actually fear the most. Failing to understand the values and concerns of the groups most at risk, they fail to alter the behaviors of those people engaged in unsafe behaviors.¹³

For example, efforts to get children to brush their teeth tend to focus on the dangers and harm from tooth decay, but the very young tend to see dental visits and fillings as almost minor distractions. It surprises me when I hear dentists tell children to brush their teeth by phrasing the concerns in terms of health or hygiene. Some small children actually enjoy getting fillings, since it confers a certain degree of bragging rights on the playground; small boys might compete for who has the worst breath. Deep down, the dentists know this. Every dentist I have ever asked about what gets children to realize the importance of dental care gives me the same answer: "Puberty!" When children are old enough to care about social interactions, they brush their teeth to help themselves look and smell better.

The "America Responds to AIDS" advertising campaign was an ongoing effort to encourage young "at risk" populations to refrain from unsafe sexual behaviors or drug use. And when I show the commer-

cial to my undergraduate students (who, I might add, are the primary target for the television spots), they laugh. As the marketing director of a condom manufacturer explained to us when visiting the class, today's college students have lived with AIDS their entire lives and consider the most current appeals to "safe sex" humorous, not presenting anything to really fear. Messages that advertisers presume would engender intense audience fear reactions are, instead, easily ignored. Since most at-risk youths are already aware of the dangers, the advertising is only preaching to the converted.

It is intuitively obvious that the optimal type of threat to persuade many teens to stop smoking would be to show that smokers have trouble getting dates. The students are told that it will cause lung cancer, but high school students with the arrogant confidence of youth would not see that as personally probable. Young people think they can smoke without getting cancer and they are right, at least in the short run. Damage to their health is far in the future. Studies of various types of warning labels would imply that under a "forbidden fruit" theory, antismoking advertising that obviously comes from a parental or adult world view might backfire and encourage more young people to take up smoking.¹⁴

This is not just an issue of how to encourage young people not to smoke, since antismoking messages have been singularly ineffective in changing adult behavior, too. The cancer threat is known to smokers, but they apparently fail to see it as relevant or realistic. Logically, even educated and intelligent adults are moved more by sex or dating issues than concerns for their health. I know several people my age who kept smoking after a close friend or relative died from cancer, only to quit when they started dating a nonsmoker. Despite smoking bans, publicity on numerous lawsuits, and many antismoking advertising efforts, the smoking rate among U.S. adults was unaltered during the 1990s. Tobacco critics blame this lack of success on the addictive power of nicotine, and no one seems to say that maybe the public service advertising doesn't give anyone a reason for not smoking that they would accept.

Talking with college students in Australia and New Zealand, I would quickly hear that they saw the traffic safety commercials' portrayals of death, destruction, and severe injury as threatened outcomes that would be feared *by people other than themselves*. Almost none of them perceived the strong threats as something that could happen to them; the imagery was personally relevant only to people who had experienced such an event or knew someone close to them who had been injured in a major accident. What they would fear would be the loss of their license, or even paying a high price for speeding tickets.

Their comments, plus logical intuition, indicates that law enforcement and the threat of fines or a lost license is realistic and relevant for

all drivers. But they didn't fear the death and destruction shown in the ads. In Australia, some of the commercials focused on law enforcement practices that were initiated or increased during the same period and the other ads spotlighted gory outcomes. It might have been only those law enforcement messages and practices that changed public behaviors.

Laws can only do so much. They must be enforced or the public, knowing they are irrelevant, will ignore them. Various laws all over the United States now require car passengers to wear seat belts, but these laws are not strictly enforced and are among the most readily disregarded of all safe driving requirements.¹⁵ Similarly, areas where drunk driving or speed laws are not enforced would probably find the motorists most likely to engage in unsafe behaviors.

At best, advertising can only engender very small and moderate changes in weakly held attitudes. Since it works best when it provides information that fits with attitudes people already hold, the effectiveness of any advertising effort depends on either encouraging the audience's current beliefs or giving them sound logical rationales that are not strongly contrary to those beliefs.

A traffic law is written not to change how people think but to make them behave in the proper fashion. Drivers don't care if those around them are thinking about safety, but they would like to presume that those on the road with them are awake and sober. Finite funds might be better spent with the first priority on law enforcement. By airing commercials showing death and destruction instead of raising the threat of law enforcement, governments' misdirected efforts become an example of misplaced social marketing.

DON'T SING OR DANCE WITHOUT MARKETING SENSE

In the movie *The Mask*, the main character is trapped by police and gets away by singing and dancing, creating a magical compulsion for all of the officers to join in. In the old *Andy Hardy* movies with Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, the characters often solved problems by putting on some type of show. The characters would need to quickly raise money for some cause or they would try to save the day by being just so darn cute. Of course, audiences knew it was just a script device, an excuse for the stars to sing and dance. As a movie, pragmatic logic was not a concern, but it is amazing how many real-world problems also turn to entertaining advertising as a solution.

There do exist examples of successful communications efforts that are locally targeted, carefully planned and appeal to the values of a closely defined audience. Over the long term, some campaigns can

change the public agenda, increasing public awareness and changing general perceptions of issues previously ignored. In Australia, where the Antarctic ozone hole has boosted the incidence of skin cancer, a long-running, mostly positive advertising campaign has generated greater public awareness of the need for people to wear hats and sunscreen outdoors. However, many people still prefer not to wear hats for style concerns and don't want to mess with lotions.

But, in most cases, advertising can't do anything to help solve the problem and the often-lost initial analysis from a marketing point of view would reveal this. Instead, for a variety of reasons, the people involved with public health issues acquire a misplaced trust in the power of advertising to change the world.

The world is not a movie. Advertising is not magic. Maybe, sometimes, in some ways, it can encourage some good changes in some people, but that weak collection of "maybes" is not a valid basis for all the faith placed in it by people wanting to serve social goals. Whether in business or to serve social goals, a marketing decision maker should use advertising only if it is more efficient than other means of doing a particular job. And for the deep-seated problems behind many social ills, mass media advertising is a very weak or near-useless tool.

NOTES

1. Jacqueline Kochak, "Rape Problem Now Being Addressed," *Opelika-Auburn News* (February 17, 2000), pp. 1A, 2A.

2. The organization's Web page, available at www.breastcancerfund.org, which was established to help generate donations, also includes a link to the "Obsessed With Breasts" ad campaign. These associated pages provide detailed background and a businesslike statement of the goals of the campaign, reviews of how the publicity fit those goals, links to the news articles that the controversy generated, and copies of the billboards and bus shelter ads that were the focus of attention.

3. In this unfortunate case, children should be told not to blindly run in front of the bus and presume that everyone obeys the law. Laws requiring all traffic to stop for school buses are designed to limit problems for children who carelessly rush to or from the vehicles, not so lazy adults can avoid helping small children who have yet to learn road safety. Advertising to motorists would not alter the need for the bus drivers to watch the children as they cross.

4. For example, see Robert S. Adler and R. David Pittle, "Cajolery or Command: Are Education Campaigns an Adequate Substitute for Regulation?" *Yale Journal of Regulation*, vol. 1 (no. 2, 1984), pp. 159-193; Hae-Kyong Bang, "Misplacing the Media Role in Social Marketing Public Health," *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, vol. 17 (no. 6, 2000), pp. 279-280; Brian R. Flay and Thomas D. Cook, "Evaluation of Mass Media Prevention Campaigns," in R. E. Rice and C. K. Atkin, eds., *Public Communications Campaigns* (Beverly Hills,

CA: Sage, 1981), pp. 239–264; Walter Gantz, Michael Fitzmaurice, and E. Yoo, “Seat Belt Campaigns and Buckling Up: Do the Media Make A Difference?” *Health Communication*, vol. 2 (1990), pp. 1–12; William J. McGuire, “Public Communications as a Strategy of Inducing Health Promoting Behavior Change,” *Preventive Medicine*, vol. 13 (1984), pp. 299–319; David G. Schmeling and C. Edward Wotring, “Agenda-Setting Effects of Drug Abuse Public Service Ads,” *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 53 (no. 4, 1976), pp. 743–747.

5. While modern, politically correct sensibilities would denigrate “crying Indian” as a negative term, this has always been the name of the commercial, it is used as a label or description when the spot won awards, it is the name that is still used in textbooks to describe the spot. I didn’t create the name; I’m just using it.

6. Alyse R. Gotthoffer and Kent M. Lancaster, “Estimating the Audience Coverage of PSAs: The Ad Council’s Drunk Driving Prevention Campaign,” *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 41 (May–June 2001).

7. Terry Macpherson and Tony Lewis, “New Zealand Drink-Driving Statistics: The Effectiveness of Road Safety Television Advertising,” *Marketing Bulletin*, vol. 9 (1998): pp. 40–51. Another study questioned whether Macpherson and Lewis were correct, but also concluded that the money might have been better spent on enforcement of other noncommunications activities. Richard Tay, “Effectiveness of the Anti-Drink Driving Advertising Campaign in New Zealand,” *Road and Transport Research*, vol. 18 (December 1999), pp. 3–15.

8. One of the people involved with the U.S. campaign expressed her belief during a radio news interview that Americans would not respond to the kind of images used on the other side of the world. That may be true, though even more graphic videos are often shown to U.S. high school students and are used in some driver education programs. As will be explained in Chapter 8, a more logical explanation for the greater “restraint” from gore in the U.S. campaign is that most television stations and networks would not broadcast the more graphic commercials.

9. Australians are also barred from talking on the phone while driving. Despite strong evidence that this distraction increases the probability of accidents, the U.S. state and local governments have been reluctant to pass a similar restriction. A Congressman called a radio talk show on his car phone to argue against such a new law and was in an accident during the conversation.

10. Irving L. Janis and S. Feshbach, “Effects of Fear-Arousing Communications,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol. 48 (January 1953), pp. 78–92; Irving L. Janis and S. Feshbach, “Personality Differences Associated with Responsiveness to Fear-Arousing Communications,” *Journal of Personality*, vol. 23 (December 1954), pp. 154–166.

11. It could be argued that the theory has such staying power in spite of a lack of support because it has been adopted by the textbooks. Herbert Jack Rotfeld, “The Textbook Effect: Conventional Wisdom, Myth, and Error in Marketing,” *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 64 (April 2000), pp. 122–126.

12. Franklin J. Boster and Paul Mongeau, “Fear-Arousing Persuasive Messages,” *Communications Yearbook 8*, Robert N. Bostrom, ed. (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1984), pp. 330–375; Herbert J. Rotfeld, “Fear Appeals and Persuasion: Assumptions and Errors in Advertising Research,” *Current Issues and Research*

in *Advertising*, vol. 11 (1988), pp. 21–40; Stephen R. Sutton, "Fear-Arousing Communications: A Critical Examination of Theory and Research," in *Social Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, J. Richard Eiser, ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1982), pp. 303–337; Stephen R. Sutton, "Shock Tactics and the Myth of the Inverted U," *British Journal of Addiction*, vol. 87 (April 1992), pp. 517–519.

13. Robert P. Bush, David J. Ortinau, and Alan J. Bush, "Personal Value Structures and AIDS Prevention: Are Safe-Sex Messages Reaching High Risk Groups or Merely Preaching to the Converted?" *Journal of Health Care Marketing*, vol. 14 (Spring 1994), pp. 12–20.

14. Many people have asserted that the "don't smoke" ads run by cigarette companies might have the opposite effect on the targeted youth, resulting in increased smoking behaviors. The intent of such criticisms are cynical attacks on the tobacco industry, but such an outcome is logical in that it has been shown with alcohol warnings, television viewer advisories (as are discussed in Chapter 8), and warning information on full-fat foods. L. B. Snyder and D. J. Blood, "Caution: Alcohol Advertising and the Surgeon General's Warnings May Have Adverse Effects on Young Adults," *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, vol. 20 (1992), pp. 37–53; B. J. Bushman and A. D. Stack, "Forbidden Fruit Versus Tainted Fruit: Effects of Warning Labels on Attraction to Television Violence," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, vol. 2 (1996), pp. 207–226; Brad J. Bushman, "Effects of Warning and Information Labels on Consumption of Full-Fat, Reduced-Fat and No-Fat Products," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 83 (no. 1, 1988), pp. 97–101.

15. Some state laws have an exemption for drivers of pickup trucks so they don't have to wear the belts. In Georgia and Indiana, adult passengers can ride in the open rear gate area of the truck, which makes a belt irrelevant and makes a mockery of the law itself.