



# Misplaced marketing

## The social harm of public service advertising

*Herbert Jack Rotfeld*

Professor of Marketing, Auburn University, Alabama, USA

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**Abstract** *The power of advertising is presumed and people behind most public service advertising campaigns see advertising itself as the solution. An advertising campaign that aims to serve a social goal faces many pragmatic obstacles. Advertising professionals contribute to this problem. 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. The Advertising Council, “dedicated to using the great resources of the advertising industry” to serve the public interest is the largest producer of public service mass communications, campaigns in the USA. 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. In other countries that lack the traditions of the US Advertising Council, the advertising-based campaigns draw on government tax funds or limited resources of a public group.*

A report to the Auburn University Senate in Fall 2001 revealed that trash and wanton destruction by football fans cost the general budget several hundred thousand dollars per year. As a faculty committee discussed possible solutions, several people indicated to me that they see the “best” solution as an advertising campaign encouraging people not to trash the campus. (There is a basic reluctance to strongly enforce existing laws on the visiting sports boosters.) Government and public service agencies concerned about date rape, drunk driving, road rage, unsafe sexual practices, under-age cigarette smoking, illegal drug use and even littering, all expect advertising to reduce the incidence of these not-infrequent socially undesirable activities.

### Problem behaviors

Yet no one asks whether mass media advertising can persuade anyone to change their “problem” behaviors. Usually, it cannot. For most public service advertising campaigns, not only is this basic question not asked, it is not even considered. The power of advertising is presumed and people behind most public service advertising campaigns see advertising itself as the solution.

An advertising campaign that aims to serve a social goal faces many pragmatic obstacles. The obstacles are so great and the problems so numerous, 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.

Advertising professionals contribute to this problem. Just as advertising people like to claim power in moving products, they also claim an equally great ability to move the public mind in “selling” various social goals. But

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*Author’s note:* Material for the article is drawn from chapter 5 of the author’s book, *Adventures in Misplaced Marketing* (Quorum Books, Westport, CT, 2001).



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**Many Advertising Council campaigns finish with few people knowing they existed**

such claims depend on a logical *non sequitur*. 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 (Wolburg, 2001).

The Advertising Council, “dedicated to using the great resources of the advertising industry” to serve the public interest, is the largest producer of public service mass communications campaigns in the USA. 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 many Advertising Council campaigns finish their efforts with few people ever knowing they existed, running their entire span with few target consumers 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 free. No one is in a position to make certain the free media placements reach the intended audience.

**Spots tend to appear in late night or other fringe periods**

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 (Lancaster and Lancaster, 2002), and even this small audience might not have been the people desired for the campaigns. If no one sees the message, there exist 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.

**Some campaigns can change the public agenda**

Even with donated media time and space, there are still costs involved. Not all public interest advertising campaigns are PSAs. In other countries that lack the traditions of the US Advertising Council, the advertising-based campaigns draw on government tax funds or limited resources of a public group. Even in the USA, many new campaigns are purchasing media time and space, hiring salaried advertising professionals to write, produce or buy the time and space for the advertisements. 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.

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. But in most cases, advertising cannot 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.

**Trust in advertising can  
become part of the problem**

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. 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.

The world is not a movie. Advertising is not magic.

Maybe, sometimes, in some ways, it can do some good with some people, but that weak collection of “maybe” is not a valid basis for all the faith it gets from people wanting to serve social goals. Whether in business or for serving social goals, a marketing decision maker should use advertising only if it is more efficient than other means of doing a particular job. For the deep-seated problems behind many social ills, mass media advertising is a very weak or near-useless tool.

Yet despite these intrinsic limitations and inherent problems that make it a wasted effort, many people feel that they are doing “something” by advertising. Since this advertising effort misdirects resources as well as attention, this trust in advertising that is not a real solution becomes part of the problem.

**References**

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