

Straight to the heart.

What thirty years of social issues communications has taught us.

by Chris Knopf, Chairman, Executive Creative Director, Mintz & Hoke Communications Group

Alan Mintz and Joe Hoke, our founders, had distinctly different personalities and views of the world. But they shared a few core beliefs. One was in the responsibility of companies like ours to use the power of strategic marketing communications to affect positive social change, to influence attitudes and behavior in the service of the public good.

Both these men were driven by a spirit of altruism. But they were also successful entrepreneurs, who understood that the rewards of social responsibility were both spiritual and material.

After developing dozens of successful social issue programs over a period of 30 years, we still believe this duality of reward is the ultimate in benign self-interest – a synthesis of motivations rather than a contradiction.

Whether you're selling yogurt, jet engines or yearly breast exams, the same principles and best practices apply.

Behavioral psychologists will tell you that people work for money when that's the only type of work available. But given the chance, they will always choose to work where the psychic benefits are at least as significant as the financial. The same goes for organizations. Although hard to measure, we know instinctively that the feeling of doing good works makes people better workers, which reflects on everything they do during the day.

Another thing we've learned is that the tenets of effective strategic marketing communications are universal.

It starts with a deep dive into the hearts and minds of your target audience. We do this through an approach that generally falls under the category of "qualitative market research," though it can take many different forms depending on the task, and is eminently scalable up and down.

Which means you don't need an expensive, time-consuming research study to isolate messages that will not only attract attention, but will change attitudes and behaviors. There is an investment, but no other aspect of the project will pay greater dividends, since everything that follows will be based on insights and information only available from the people you seek to influence.

After performing hundreds of qualitative studies on subjects ranging from teenage pregnancy, to compulsive gambling, seatbelt use, sexual health, and the perception of people with disabilities, several phenomena consistently emerge.

- We, and our clients, always learn something we didn't know that has a material impact on the project.
- That something almost always forms the basis for the communications program.
- What messages seem obvious at the beginning of a project are almost never the drivers at the end.
- It's almost always better to go deep with a small sample than shallow with many.
- Consistency is also more important than quantity. Especially when using a small sample.
- Injecting creativity into the mix stimuli will tell you much more than using straight-ahead prompts alone, since it tends to engage the emotions, which are often more important in people's decision-making process than rational thought.
- Body language speaks volumes. Telephone interviews can be effective, but it's good to see the respondents' first, non-verbal reactions, which are often more telling than what they end up saying (especially after they've had a chance to think about their answer).

While our process for arriving at the most effective messages works equally well for all marketing endeavors, we've learned that the creative work itself in support of sensitive social issues has some distinct characteristics. It's dangerous to decide there are rules dictating the best or worst creative approaches, but we think there are guidelines worth contemplating.

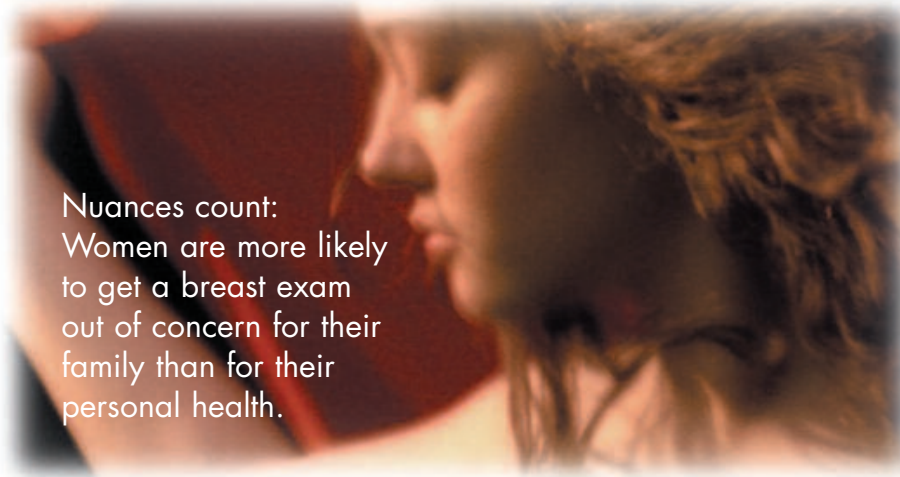
There are often lots of different audiences, and they all matter. Most social issues include people who are directly involved (for example, a compulsive gambler), indirectly (the gambler's family) or personally committed (the leader of an advocacy group focused on compulsive gambling). There are also government agencies, legislative committees, journalists specializing in the subject and other constituencies that can either support your communications, or undermine their effectiveness. While the process may seem onerous at the start of a project, we believe fervently that all these constituencies need to have enough involvement in developing the messages to feel some ownership of the resulting creative work. You can't please everybody all the time, but you can avoid damaging resistance or publicity by keeping all stakeholders somewhere inside the loop.

However, it can't be done without a strong client advocate. Social issue communications usually come with at least one committee overseeing the work, and sometimes several. As stated above, they need to be involved throughout the process (not just when you're ready to show them some clever ideas); but without a strong, tactful and tireless advocate for your work, committees will inevitably grind the ideas down to a mediocre pulp. Not because they are foolish or arrogant, but because the nature of committees is to compromise and concede. Ideally, once the strategic direction for the work is agreed upon, as are the basic creative parameters (humor/no humor, negative/ no negative, real

people/actors, high impact-minimal information/low impact-maximum information, etc.), you want to work with a committee that is willing to entrust the final product to a designated project leader, or very small work team.

People don't like to be reminded of unpleasant realities. Especially when it involves their own complicity in the subject, such as compulsive gambling, smoking, drug use, child abuse or bad health choices. You have to give them a reason why they should turn off their automatic avoidance and denial mechanisms and pay attention to your pitch.

Humor can be really a great, or a really bad idea. Many of the social issues we've dealt with connect in some way to serious disease, injury or death. As stated above, people would really rather not think about any of these things. One of the best ways to break down that initial barrier is to leaven the message with humor. However, this is highly dependent on the issue at hand. For example, as part of an AIDS awareness campaign, we needed to target people when they were most likely to engage in unsafe sex – the bar and nightclub scene. This is not the place for preachy,



Nuances count:
Women are more likely to get a breast exam out of concern for their family than for their personal health.

intimidating messages. Instead, we wrote humorous reminders that condoms are a good idea on cocktail napkins and on posters hung above urinals and toilet seats. On the other hand, when developing messages related to people with mental disabilities, we discovered that humor of any kind alienated at

least some of the people we wanted to influence. No matter how well the ideas worked with some, it wasn't worth the negative impact on others.

Subtleties are important. Sometimes what looks like a very minor detail can seriously undermine the strength of a social issues message, even negate it completely. People involved in a social issue usually have their own way of speaking about it, their own terminologies and more that would be code to the uninitiated. Knowing these nuances is another crucial responsibility of the upfront planners. Although it might seem like political correctness to outsiders, it's more than that to those on the inside. It's a common language that communicates important perspectives and attitudes. And it's not only words – images can be just as sensitive.

Shock and awe is as likely to turn off as turn on. Contrary to popular belief, shocking, fear-inducing, pathetic, stomach-turning or gratuitously disturbing images force most people to look away from an ad, not read it. That we see these techniques used creates the illusion that they work. We believe that they only work through sheer volume. The advertiser is content to turn away 90% of their potential audience if a fraction of the remaining 10% give money, or perform some

other action that benefits the cause. This is maybe okay if that fraction still represents a large absolute number, but if you don't have millions to spend, it's a bad approach. We'd also fear for the long-term health of an organization's brand relying on this approach alone.

A powerful negative message that doesn't immediately induce rejection can work, but, negative feelings are not enough to induce people to change the way they think or behave. The attention-grabbing, negative image – and/or words – must be followed up quickly with a positive message, something hopeful, some countering argument that rewards the reader or viewer for having endured the unpleasant initial experience.

Once you've captured their attention, and delivered your counter argument, give people something to do. A call to action is always a good idea, even if it's not essential for people to respond. It telegraphs the fact that the organization is serious about the subject and willing to help you get more involved in the solution.

At its best, the flow of the experience for target audiences of social issues communications is:

1. Okay, you've got my attention. I'm disturbed, engaged, curious, etc.
2. Okay, this is a bad situation, but apparently there's something that can be done about it. It's far from hopeless.
3. Great, there's a way I can get involved (get more information, give money, signup to give of myself).

In the same way that we don't differentiate between the emotional and financial rewards of social issues communications, we feel the same level of satisfaction over a successful campaign for an aviation company as we do for the Connecticut Department of Public Health. At our agency, we believe that the opportunity to serve both the private and public sectors creates a richer work experience and a better communications product for everyone. Experience in one sector clearly informs the quality of work in the other. Commercial campaigns are more emotionally compelling, and public service programs are more strategically planned and professionally executed.

A rare win-win.

Mintz & Hoke is a full service, marketing communications group that develops and implements integrated programs that nurture, defend, motivate and glorify brands throughout distribution channels and at every stage of the selling cycle. We call our approach business-to-channel communications – it's all about helping clients make the complex sale happen. Mintz & Hoke Communications Group, *help clients win.*

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