

PSAs IN A NEW MEDIA AGE

By Graeme Browning

Smokey Bear is now fighting forest fires in cyberspace, and he's in good company. Go online these days and you're bound to come across banner ads and Web sites asking you not only to buy more, but also to do more: to become a mentor, recycle your trash, donate an organ, or wear a seat belt. "As these media are maturing, they are bringing public service along with them," explains Peggy Conlon, president of the Ad Council, one of the front-runners in online public service advertising. And they are doing it with mixed results: some realizing great successes, others disappointment.

In 1996, the Washington, D.C.-based Benton Foundation teamed up with the Ad Council to launch its online "Connect for Kids" campaign (initially called KidsCampaign), which features an all-inclusive Web site for people looking for information about how to help children. Over the years, what started as a traditional broadcast public service advertisement (PSA) campaign, where audiences were directed to the Web site, has increasingly used online PSAs – a strategy that makes sense given the rise in the number of people using the Internet since the campaign began. According to former Benton Foundation President Larry Kirkman, the campaign's online PSA received almost 1.2 billion impressions last year – which helped drive the number of monthly visitors to the "Connect for Kids" Web site from 250,000 to as many as one million today.

The experience wasn't quite the same for the New York-based Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation, which, for almost five decades, has relied on local television and newspapers to run public service messages publicizing its fund-raising efforts. This spring, for the first time, the Foundation turned its PSA focus to the new world of the Internet – with disappointing results.

Even though the Web site CNBC.com ran ads for the Foundation 15.5 million times over a two-month period, the online PSAs attracted only nine new donors, says Lorraine Egan, the Foundation's executive director. "That's a very small success rate. I calculated it out to be about 0.003 percent," she adds.

Still others, while recognizing the current limitations of the Internet and other interactive mediums, point out that online PSAs can allow their audiences to get immediate access to in-depth information that isn't possible with a traditional 800 number. "There are a lot of myths and misconceptions out there," explains Robert Speildenner, communications manager for the Coalition for Organ Donation, based in Richmond, Virginia. "The Web not only helps us dispel these myths, but also it gives people an easy way to ask somebody about doubts they may have."

While the changing media landscape presents all sorts of opportunities for campaigns trying to get their messages out, many open questions accompany those open doors. Will the Internet and other emerging mediums give PSAs the potential to target audiences more directly and effectively, or will these messages get limited visibility from their new hosts in lieu of any requirements to serve the public interest? Will this new technology be a great equalizer, raising controversial issues and reaching people too often ignored, or will it threaten privacy and exacerbate the so-called "digital divide" between those who have access to the Internet and those who don't? And will the Internet allow nonprofits to run effective PSA campaigns for much smaller sums of money, or will questions continue to be raised about the inherent creative and placement limitations on the Web?

Indisputably, since Smokey Bear made his debut on broadcast television 57 years ago, the media environment within which PSAs must exist has changed dramatically. Recently, MTV Networks announced a plan called MTV360 to unite its online and on-air presence, including a music-download service and cross-promotional activities that send viewers of the television channel online. AOL TV, launched last October, allows AOL subscribers to surf the Web, send instant messages, and watch television, all at the same time. And just a few months ago, ABC announced an upcoming new venture, *LivePlanet*, whose founders include actors Ben Affleck and Matt Damon. *LivePlanet* has been billed as a “reality” TV show that allows viewers to participate either by watching a broadcast of the program or by playing along on the show’s Web site (or, as the network hopes, by doing both at the same time).

Amid these changes, more and more people interested in getting out a message – be it for a commercial or public service purpose – seem to be acknowledging that they can no longer rely solely on the print and broadcast efforts that were sufficient only a few years ago. “The only way to make a real dent today is to decide who your target audience is and then follow that audience in as many different media you can in order to get them to understand your particular message,” explains Joseph Turow, Robert Lewis Shawon professor of communication at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School of Communication.

For many sponsors of public service messages, that increasingly means going online. Leading market research firms believe that before this decade ends Americans will get the majority of their information from the Internet and other interactive technologies. While only 21 percent, or about 40 million U.S. adults, were connected to the Internet in 1995,¹ today more than 167 million regularly log on at home or at work.² And that number is expected to rise even higher in the years ahead.

It came as no surprise that, as the Internet began its meteoric growth in the mid-1990s, advertisers followed their customers online, contributing to 18 consecutive quarters of positive growth, according to the Interactive Advertising Bureau, the leading online advertising association. Yet, high-flying at the beginning of last year – when 17 dot-coms ran commercials during Super Bowl 2000 – online ad sales slowed noticeably after Internet stocks began to plummet only a few months later. “Online advertising is going through its own Death Valley right now,” says Forrester Research Inc.’s Jim Nail in the June edition of *eCompany*, “but there are clearly greener pastures ahead.”

According to a January report Nail authored for Forrester, a leading new-technology research firm, within the next five years marketing on the Internet and in interactive television (ITV) will divert \$40 billion from the traditional media, including 15 percent of the ad revenues for broadcast television and newspapers and 11 percent for magazines. “Far from abandoning the Web, both dot-coms and traditional companies plan to grow their online presence,” predicts the Forrester report.³ In spite of these rosy forecasts, a good deal of uncertainty remains about the future of Internet advertising – and even more about whether PSAs will be able to ride an online advertising boom or be a casualty of its bust. Clearly, in recent years the presence of online PSAs has increased as more and more advocates use banner ads – those thin boxes that line the top and sides of Web sites – as well as radio and television spots to drive traffic to their Web sites. In November 1997, the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) announced that it would donate 5 percent of its ad inventory to PSAs. And the Ad Council recently reported approximately \$391 million in donated advertising space generated from online placements alone last year – an increase of 500 percent from the year before.

The Coalition for Organ Donation, which has collaborated with the Ad Council, says it is pleased with the amount of traffic their banner ads are driving to its Web site. In May, an estimated 6,000 of the 109,000 visitors to the Coalition’s site arrived by clicking on banner ads appearing on such disparate general-interest Web sites as the Onion, the Wedding Channel, and Geocities, Spieldenner says.

Last year, the Coalition, which first began working with the Ad Council in 1994, added online PSAs to its mix of traditional media messages. The Ad Council distributes the Coalition’s online PSAs to Web ad servers such as Doubleclick and Flycast. “Companies know they can go to the Ad Council to get these banner ads, so there’s a higher chance of us getting our PSAs placed online this way,” Spieldenner says. Still, he says he worries about the arbitrary nature of PSA placement. “How do companies choose us over some other organization? I’m not sure. Sometimes I think it may be how important the Webmaster thinks our issue is,” Spieldenner adds.

Of course, there’s no guarantee that anyone, let alone the right audience will see an online PSA campaign. According to Turow: “The problem on the Web is similar to the problems in the traditional media. PSAs are being put up on the Web helter-skelter.” As a result, the Ad Council increasingly has focused its attention on building relationships with leading Internet distributors who provide the space and have the ability to target the messages. Additionally, some of the major players on the Internet are beginning to establish policies about their public service commitments and dedicate staff to manage those programs. For example, the AOL Time Warner Foundation now has a staff member who is specifically responsible for online PSAs.

But compared with traditional broadcasters, who are required by the Federal Communications Commission to set aside airtime to serve the public interest, there is no corresponding system for online PSAs.

DoubleClick Inc., one of the leading ad-server companies, receives 16 to 20 requests every month to run online PSAs, and commits to run each campaign chosen for one month, according to spokesperson Jennifer Blum. The number of times the chosen online PSA runs each month can fluctuate: for example, in June 2000 Doubleclick ran 3.2 million PSA impressions, while the following month it ran 124 million impressions. So far this year Doubleclick is averaging approximately 200 million PSA impressions per month, Blum says.

Last year, America Online, which with Yahoo! accounts for almost half the advertising on the Internet, estimates it ran about \$25 million worth of online PSAs. According to Jenn Thompson, a director at the AOL Time Warner Foundation who is responsible for online PSAs, AOL provides space to between 10 and 15 campaigns per month resulting in anywhere from a couple thousand to several million impressions. However, citing one of the common problems with public service advertising – online or on-air – Thompson explains that the PSAs AOL provides space to generally appear “at random, wherever there is unsold ad inventory.”

While it is estimated that more than 50 percent of U.S. households are now online, some groups are better targets on the Internet than others, according to Jim Margolis, senior partner with Greer, Margolis, Mitchell, Burns and Associates, a Washington-based communications firm that has conducted numerous public service campaigns. “I can run an AmeriCorps PSA online because its target is young and Internet-savvy. But would I go online with a campaign designed to get low-income families enrolled in subsidized health care programs? Probably not,” Margolis says. That, of course, ties into a larger problem. Today, the growth in Internet use is strongest among urban populations and those Americans with more than a high school education, meaning that many rural, poor, and minority communities – the very groups PSAs are often trying to reach – are still underrepresented in the online audiences.

Right now, measuring the impact of online PSAs is also challenging. Banner ads, for instance, are billed on a CPM, or cost per thousand, basis, which indicates the number of times an ad was downloaded onto a computer screen. This measurement supposedly indicates how many individual viewers saw the ad, but it's impossible to be sure whether 1,000 “impressions” results from 1,000 separate individuals looking at the ad or 100 individuals each looking at the ad 10 times. While many say this is irrelevant, noting that repetition has always been critical in advertising, the fact remains that audience measurement is still a relatively clumsy affair on the Internet, especially for those without big budgets for tracking and monitoring.

“It's very vogue now to pooch-pooch the effectiveness of banner ads on the Internet,” says the Ad Council's Peggy Conlon, “but we can certainly demonstrate that they have driven traffic to sites for more information.” She adds, “I think as time goes by we'll be able to survey these populations, get a baseline of certain attitudes and behaviors, and demonstrate that this medium is just as effective as the other more traditional media in getting the message across.” Yet while some Web sites have mechanisms in place to measure the size of their audiences, often PSA campaigns don't know whom they are reaching, let alone whether behavior or attitudes have changed as a result.

Additionally, cyberspace is still rocky territory for the creative people who design online ads. Banner ads have obvious design limitations. Even the most talented and dedicated graphic artist can be hard pushed to design a grab-the-gut image that fits into a space less than three inches long and one inch wide and that can operate on outdated as well as state-of-the-art software. Jan Leth, Ogilvy Interactive's senior creative partner, puts it a little more bluntly in *eCompany*: “The creative in most banner ads suck.”

In fact, much of the blame for the current poor performance of online ads, analysts say, should be directed at banner ads. When they first appeared in 1994, banner ads were wildly successful, enticing at least 10 percent of the visitors to a site like Yahoo! to “click-through” to an advertiser's site. Today, even though banner ads now account for half of all the money spent on Internet advertising, the average click-through rate is closer to 0.5 percent. When it comes to the quality of the creative, it should come as no surprise that the Internet is showing a learning curve, just as television did in its earlier years, or that PSAs, which have far less money spent on them than traditional advertisements, are lagging even further behind.

In an effort to resuscitate the flagging online ad industry, the IAB issued new, voluntary standards for larger banner ads February 26. Advertisers now have room to add interactivity and an “emotional element” designed to give banner ads some of the punch of television commercials – characteristics that are especially important for PSAs. Some are also experimenting with a certain kind of pop-up ad called a “superstitial” that features 20-second animation to capture the attention of the audience. It should be noted, however, that few Americans have home computers capable of downloading huge graphics files, so the high-resolution photography that could make online PSAs more appealing may not be visible on the majority of computer screens.

Many believe that the Internet holds the potential to allow advertisers to deliver public service messages in a much more cost-effective manner. It doesn't cost any more money for a Web publisher to put up three ads than one ad, according to Robbin Zeff, author of *The Nonprofit Guide to the Internet: How to Survive and Thrive*.⁴ The lagging commercial ad market online is also a boost, she points out. “I'm telling all my clients right now that this is the time to do PSAs, because there's lots of unused ad inventory out there. And it's in the best interest of these Web sites to look like they have a lot of ads running.”

The Internet and other new interactive mediums don't yet offer the same massive audiences as traditional broadcast technologies, however. Campaign officials at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), for example, say they put their newest PSA, aimed at convincing cat owners to neuter or spay their pets, on the Internet after broadcasters turned it down earlier this year because it was too controversial. "While you get more people seeing [an Internet ad] over time – which is a great thing – you also don't get that instant 'Kaboom!' that you do when something's broadcast in the middle of the Super Bowl," Nicholas Racz, an independent film director who helped create PETA's PSA, admitted.

At the same time that advancing communication technologies offer new opportunities to reach audiences, they also pose some potential roadblocks to the success of online public service advertising. In the past three years, more than six million people have downloaded free versions of software programs that go by such names as "AdSubtract" or "AdKiller" and block online ads from view whenever a Web page loads on a computer screen. Similarly, interactive television and new digital video recorders such as TiVo and Replay TV enable viewers to skip through commercials, including PSAs. Zeff thinks concerns that new technologies will kill off PSA audiences are overblown. "People have been fast-forwarding or getting up and going off the kitchen during commercials for a long time. With every new technology, people think we're re-creating the world, and we're just not." Others say that as technologies like TiVo and Replay TV build a market, advertisers will simply move to programming to get out their messages. Already today product placements in movies and on television for commercial products, like Coca-Cola or BMW, are big business. Similarly, public health organizations also work with the

entertainment industry to incorporate portrayals of health and social issues into programming. Many say this approach may be ultimately more effective in changing public behavior. One recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation of regular viewers of the television show *ER*, for example, found that knowledge about a particular sexually transmitted disease tripled immediately after the show addressed the topic.⁵

What seems to be cause for greater concern among consumer interest groups, however, is the potential of these new interactive mediums to reveal the personal behaviors of their audience. Internet advertisers, for example, can monitor which of their Web pages are browsed by viewers and how long they stay on each page, as well as report how often purchases are made at the end of that process. That may be troubling to people buying camping equipment, or even cars, online. But it can be terrifying to a person who needs information about a domestic violence shelter or a rape crisis center. "If people feel they can't come anonymously to a place that has sensitive information, then they're not going to use the services that place offers," says Ari Schwartz, a senior policy analyst for the Center for Democracy and Technology.

The reality is that databases that result from such "data mining" activities have become key to successful marketing on the Web, advertisers say. At the same time, public concern over the invasion of consumer privacy has prompted a number of congressional measures aimed at establishing federal guidelines to control the commercial use of personal information.

After a four-month study of TiVo's technology, the nonprofit Privacy Foundation and the University of Denver Privacy Center concluded that TiVo "gathers enough information to track individual users' home viewing habits while apparently promising not to do so" and "could identify the personal viewing habits of subscribers at will."⁶

"Even within interactive TV...most content is served over a private network. But nevertheless, all that information can be used for purposes that aren't appropriate. Everyone's aware of that," says Andy Beers, group business development manager for the Microsoft TV group, Microsoft Corporation's venture into ITV programming. To soothe subscribers' qualms, Beers says, the cable television and telecommunications companies providing broadcast signals for ITV can offer the options of viewing advertising either on an "opt-in" basis, where the viewer agrees to provide personal data in return for access to an ad, or on the basis of "anonymous targeting," where the set-top box that controls the broadcast signal is electronically programmed not to report the subscriber's viewing habits back to the broadcaster's computer.

On the other hand, better targeting offers many advantages for PSA campaigns, which want to reach the audiences most in need of hearing their messages. A PSA about child care might be placed on parenting Web sites, or sites that sell baby clothes, for example. Even more important, experts say, is the kind of helpful information that can be exchanged in a matter of seconds. "One of the benefits for public service advertisers is that, for the very first time, we can...facilitate a more powerful one-to-one relationship that might include informational video updates and calls to action in full screen, full motion, full resolution video," notes Stacy Jolna, TiVo's chief programming officer and vice president of media partnerships.

No matter what, PSAs will have to become much more media-savvy in order to thrive in this new environment, some makers of the new technologies warn. "The world changes when you give consumers complete control over what they're watching. It places more of an onus on the shoulders of the producers to make that content more compelling, so that viewers will actually watch it, pay attention, and respond to calls to action," notes Jolna.

Nonprofits also may have to look for opportunities to ensure that their messages are played on demand, rather than being automatically sandwiched inside a program. Possibilities include messages that automatically run across the television screen while it sits idle, or that come already loaded on a new ITV set's hard drive, or that offer viewers a series of buttons that bring up a Web site, launch a video, or give them a chance to request more information. According to Kirsten Jansen, vice president of strategic relations for Cylo, an interactive TV strategy and development company in New York: "The opportunity for PSAs offered by those two things – increased presence and the ability to interact immediately with the click of a button – is huge."

Yet, some advocates worry that the obligation to serve the public that motivates traditional broadcasters to donate airtime to PSAs won't translate fully into the emerging media. The federal government regulates programming on broadcast TV because of the limited broadcast spectrum. But what happens with interactive TV, where the bulk of the programming comes from cable companies and Internet content providers, neither of which is governed by the same rules about what they offer audiences? And when TVs start providing Internet and other nonbroadcast services, who controls the content, including PSAs? Cable companies don't have to share access to their networks. So can a cable operator refuse to air a PSA that carries a message the operator doesn't like? Are these areas that warrant regulation? And what will all these changes mean for PSAs, especially as media power continues to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands?

Keith Fulton, vice president of the AOL-Time Warner Foundation, believes that mergers between major media companies will actually boost the power of PSA campaigns because they can be promoted across many mediums. But others are more skeptical. Nonprofit Internet advisor Robbin Zeff cautions that, as these mergers concentrate decision-making about when to donate airtime or ad space, only the major advertising agencies will have the clout to get through to them with donation requests. "As these mergers take place PSAs will become much more formalized," she says. "A controversial issue probably won't be supported by the Ad Council. Look at what they choose now. They tend to be pretty vanilla issues."

Some advocates see even bigger problems. "In place of an open network, media conglomerates are spending billions to create what they call 'walled gardens,' but which are really new forms of electronic enclosures designed to ensure their continued dominance of the media system," explains Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy, in a recent letter about a conference on the future of broadband communications.⁷ "Unless we act soon, nonprofit organizations will find it increasingly difficult to operate in an online environment that favors big business over small, e-commerce over e-democracy, and public relations over public service," he adds.

Still, there is no turning back the clock. According to Chester, when less than 20 percent of the public will get digital TV from over-the-air sources in the future, those who care about PSAs need to look carefully at where TV is going and develop strategies with the cable and satellite operators who control the two-way signal.

The Ad Council's Peggy Conlon agrees. "We are going to have to figure out how to compete for attention in this new marketplace. Just as paid advertisers have to compete. The universe is not going to change to suit us, we're going to have to figure out how to do business in the new media marketplace."

Graeme Browning is the author of the upcoming *Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Transform American Politics, 2nd Ed.*, a former technology reporter with *National Journal*, and an expert on the impact of the Internet on democracy.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ National Science Foundation, *Science and Engineering Indicators – 2000*, available at <http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/seind00/frames.htm>.
- ² Nielsen NetRatings, June 2001, available at <http://209.249.142.27/nnp/owa/NRpublicreports.usagemonthly>.
- ³ Jim Nail, "Online Advertising Eclipsed," (Cambridge, Mass: Forrester Research Inc., January 2001.)
- ⁴ *The Nonprofit Guide to the Internet: How to Survive and Thrive*, Michael W. Johnston and Robbin L. Zeff, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999.)
- ⁵ Mollyann Brodie, Ursula Foehr, Vicky Rideout, Neal Baer, Carolyn Miller, Rebecca Fournoy, and Drew Altman, "Communicating Health Information Through The Entertainment Media," *Health Affairs*, January/February 2001, Vol. 20, No. 1.
- ⁶ David Martin, "TiVo's Data Collection and Privacy Practices," (Denver: The Privacy Foundation, March 26, 2001), available at <http://www.privacy-foundation.org/privacywatch/introduction>.
- ⁷ Available at <http://www.cme.org/access/press/010509conf.html>.