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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Thng, Jeannie.</td>
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Civic-Media AIDS Awareness Campaigns In Singapore:
The Advertising Component

By

Jeannie Thng
CIVIC-MEDIA AIDS AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS IN SINGAPORE: 
THE ADVERTISING COMPONENT

JEANNE THNG
HEAD, MASS MEDIA HEALTH EDUCATION UNIT
TRAINING & HEALTH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
MINISTRY OF HEALTH, SINGAPORE

INTRODUCTION

An integrated health promotion strategy uses messages, activities, communication channels and institutional networks in the mixture most appropriate to the specific target audience and its circumstances.

Similarly, strategic planning is required in AIDS education and advertising through the mass media. It must take into account various interrelated factors. First, the characteristics and needs of the target audiences; second, the objectives and performance targets of the programme; third, the message; and lastly, promotions, choice of media and the socio-political milieu.

This paper attempts to give a review on the evolution of the mass media campaigns on AIDS, focusing solely on its advertising programme, conducted by the Ministry of Health, Singapore. It excludes discussions on the development of all broadcast and print coverage and editorial support on AIDS education outside the sphere of the advertising programme.

It illustrates the influence of information and resources available at each particular period on the advertising programme's performance targets and strategic development. Examples of the information and resources available are the nature of the local HIV/AIDS incidence; the level of knowledge, attitude, behaviour and practice of the local population in general and those who practise high-risk behaviour; and international development and knowledge available.

Additionally, the paper highlights the special considerations and constraints peculiar in Singapore which one faces in the conception of the advertising creatives and media strategies. The overall mass media communication approaches and strategies of the four main advertising campaigns are reflected in the paper, too.
EVOLUTION OF AIDS ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS IN SINGAPORE: WHY WE DID WHAT WE DID IN THE MEDIA?

The first HIV case was detected in Singapore in 1985, and the National AIDS Control Programme was formulated then. It recommended our first AIDS education programme held from 1985 to 1987 which was supported by the development and wide distribution of education materials, which was undertaken by the Training & Health Education Department (THE) of the Ministry of Health.

Like the early incidence observed internationally, especially in the Western countries, HIV/AIDS incidence in the early years in Singapore was more typically found amongst homosexuals. The education programme inevitably was initially more focused to the target groups, also including prostitutes, masseurs, social escorts, drug addicts at rehabilitation centres and travellers before becoming more universal, to all Singaporeans in shopping centres, community centres, workplace and schools.

1988: FIRST MASS MEDIA ADVERTISING

The mass media was first used in early 1988 to publicise the availability of the AIDS test. Press advertisements encouraged those who practised high risk behaviour to use this service.

THE conducted its first mass media education and advertising campaign in conjunction with the first World AIDS Day in 1988. Level of knowledge on AIDS among the public was not only low, but also influenced by the foreign news reports and development. Hence, the focus was to inform the general public about the facts of the disease and dispel common myths.

Two television commercials were produced using animation to convey the message. One discussed the modes of transmission, stressing that “Prevention is the only cure we’ve got”; while the other addressed the fears and common myths of transmission ending with the message “You can’t just catch AIDS. You have to let someone give it to you”. Similar messages in the TV commercials were carried in cinemas and the print media, whereas radio commercials of different scenarios of infection were aired. A survey showed that 79% of the adult population were reached.

It was felt that the animatic technique of communication for the television commercials was most suitable for the first mass media education and advertising programme, in comparison to putting “real people” in the creatives. The animations were friendly and neutral for the teaching of a “new” disease in the media. Furthermore, they transcended any possible stigmatization of people, places or sexual inclinations, as the heterosexual route of transmission was already observed at that time.
As in many other public education campaigns, the English creatives were translated into the other 3 official languages, viz Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Attention was also given to buying airtime and space in the different language media.

Special consideration was also given to telecast the TV commercials later in the evening. It was felt that introduction of AIDS be kept to adults for its first mass media education.

Additionally, efforts were taken to ensure that the messages did not promote or condone promiscuity, and the recommended behaviour in the creatives was "abstinence from sex outside marriage".

Efforts to reach the general population through face-to-face programmes continued in the interim years, and was also stepped up when the second mass media advertising programme was conducted in 1991.

1991 : SECOND MASS MEDIA ADVERTISING

When the second mass media advertising programme was conducted in 1991, it has been recognized that a mass media advertising blitz would probably be limited in achieving high level of behavioural change among those who practise high risk behaviour. Behavioural change would be best accomplished through a strong face-to-face strategy. However, mass media advertising blitz would be necessary to sustain awareness and knowledge, and influence attitudes of the general public.

Comparing the 1988 advertising creatives with that of 1991, there was a shift of emphasis from "disease-centred" to "behaviour-oriented". Information on the nature of the local HIV infection situation and various media reports reflecting the level of knowledge and attitude of the public helped the development of the four new TV/cinema commercials and print advertisements. Furthermore, results of a large-scale survey "Partner Relation & Knowledge, Attitude, Behaviour and Practice on AIDS in Singapore" confirmed the direction of the creative approach and enhanced its development.

The target audience of the advertising blitz was further defined from the general population aged 18 years and above to focus on those who practise high-risk behaviour.

Moving away from the earlier animatic treatment, the new TV/cinema creatives involved "real" people and messages were personalised; at the same time, high-risk behaviour leading to infections were addressed. Each commercial showed an individual in a personal, private monologue about his/her affliction with HIV.
The first commercial showed a blue-collar worker who had been on an overseas sex tour lamenting that his "secret potion" did not work. The second presented an innocent housewife, a victim of her jet-setting businessman husband who had a fling at an overseas conference. The third showed a young executive infected after an overnight-stand following a few drinks; while the last commercial presented a young girl infected by her "first love".

The print campaign remained disease-focused, and it took an interesting approach - four press/magazine advertisements carried headlines which provoked one's curiosity and elicited participation. The headlines were presented in strong bold large type on a coloured background. There was "If you turn this page, you could get AIDS" which copy stressed that all were vulnerable to HIV infection especially if one chose to ignore the facts related to the disease. This advertisement was specially designed to observe World AIDS Day and inserted in the local dailies on that day under "World News" section. The second advertisement "Protect yourself against AIDS. Use a pencil", offered the readers a checklist on their score of knowledge on AIDS. The third - "The best way to protect yourself against AIDS is to use a pair of scissors" had a cut-out coupon of Do's and Don'ts for the readers. The last advertisement "If you want to protect yourself against AIDS, use your finger". encouraged the readers to dial the AIDS hotline to learn more about AIDS.

Greater flexibility was taken for the media plan. The TV commercials were telecast throughout the day. Additionally, these advertisements were used in cinemas. With the strategically planned creatives and messages to suit the local audience and an appropriate media plan, a post-campaign evaluation showed 85% of the population aged 15 years and above were aware of the advertising blitz and message recall was high.

1992 : THIRD MASS MEDIA ADVERTISING

With the increasing rate of HIV infection, the mass media advertising programme became an annual event and each promotional period lasted a month, in contrast to the fortnight duration of former campaigns. Besides, the trend of infection showed that heterosexual transmission via commercial sex was the most common mode of HIV infection and this target group could be best reached through the mass media.

When developing the strategy for the 1992 advertising programme, the target audience of high-risk individuals was further defined into groups based on the profile of the HIV/AIDS cases including "less educated" men and "more educated" men who were inclined to casual sex, especially patronizing prostitutes locally and overseas; and "women" who were likely to get infected through their spouses/sex partners.
Suitable printcreatives were developed for each of these groups. One of the advertisements for the "more educated" men carried the headline "With AIDS, you could pass on more than your genes to your unborn child". For the "women", there were "He says everything he has is yours...Make sure AIDS isn't one of them" and "You may be the fairer sex. But to the AIDS virus, you're just fair game". Copy for these advertisements encouraged the women to take opportunities to talk honestly with their partners. Efforts to reach and make impact on the "less educated" men were stepped up. A print advertisement "Miracle cures and other secret potions. How many lies about AIDS have you swallowed?" addressed this group's misconceptions of "no-risk" in their high-risk behaviour.

In addition, a set of four Chinese creatives, independent of the English creatives and culturally relevant to the community was developed. These Chinese print advertisements creatively used commonly-known Chinese proverbs/idioms to bring the messages closer to those high-risk individuals.

Notwithstanding, a World AIDS Day press advertisement was also developed to highlight the increasing number of infection locally, regionally and globally. Call for community action to support the World AIDS Day's theme was also emphasized in this advertisement.

The advertising strategy in 1992 further included the promotion of condom use as one way to protect one against infection in the print media. Headlines "Being Stubborn can give you AIDS" and "If you can't say 'no', say 'Put It on'" were seen. The picture of a condom was seen alongside those creatives which promoted condom use.

To reach the high risk group through unconventional media, the "Punter's Way" magazine was used. Messages were specially developed for this group in a language "they would understand". These included "AIDS. Without a condom, the odds are against you", "Don't gamble with AIDS" as well as others in Chinese.

Hence, in 1992, there was a strong and specific-groups targeted print strategy. In mainstream media like television and radio, efforts to raise awareness of high-risk practices to the general adult population were sustained through the re-run of formerly developed commercials.

Strategic creatives bearing the message "Don't bring Home AIDS" were seen on public buses which plied the main streets and known red-light areas as well as taxis. These outdoor media also carried another message "EVERYDAY, 500 people in the world are infected with the AIDS virus" which reflected the urgency for action.

This comprehensive, carefully planned targeted message and targeted media selection advertising went down well. A 92% level of awareness was reported in the post-campaign evaluation survey.
1993: FOURTH MASS MEDIA ADVERTISING

AIDS education was further stepped up from 1993 by having periodic mass media advertising throughout the year. Many magazines re-ran the old advertisements, and new creatives were developed for outdoor advertising on the window-panel of all carriages of the Mass Rapid Transit System, the local subway. As there could be many lower educated and Chinese educated travelling on the subway system, a Chinese creative, an adaption of a few old creatives, addressing the various misconceptions of high-risk behaviour as well as promoting the use of condom was developed. Another simple and direct message focusing on the overall communication strategy message “AIDS. Be Safe. Not Sorry” and promotion of condom use was also formed for the subway advertising.

For the one-month intensive promotion in 1993, a single minded creative strategy across all media was developed. As the pattern of heterosexual transmission, especially through casual and commercial sex was observed, the task was to communicate the high risk of casual/commercial sex as well as to stress the role of condom as the only protection from contracting HIV from casual/commercial sex.

The advertising approach was delivered in a serious, authoritative tone and with a sense of urgency. Its creatives execution showed the risk of casual/commercial sex by dramatizing on the fact that it was impossible to know one’s infection by just looking. It hoped to sufficiently wake people up without being so shocking as to make them turn away and deny the message. Its corresponding strategy message was “Casual sex can be deadly. Don’t risk it. If you must, at least use a condom”.

In the television/cinema commercial, it showed a man undressing a woman, accessories and dressed like a prostitute. The man was subsequently shocked to see a projected message “I’ve the AIDS virus” on her upper chest when her blouse was opened up. The voice-over stressed that “it's not this easy to tell if someone has the AIDS virus” and called for the use of condom should one be prepared for high-risk behaviour.

The print strategy included one advertisement, a direct adaption of the TV creative, and three others dramatizing the causes of local infection. The first showed a picture of a question mark on the back of a woman with a low-back blouse, and its headline was “I’ve got AIDS: I’ve had many sex partners. Were you one of them?”. The second showed a bull-eye target on the back of a man and its headline was “4 out of 5 times, the AIDS virus is spread through casual sex. Will you be the next victim?” The last advertisement developed for World AIDS Day showed a couple embracing with the words “casual sex” on their bodies, its headline was “Recent figures show clearly how AIDS is spread in Singapore”.

Other advertising creatives in outdoor media like the subway’s large posters, bus panels and bus-terminal banners were also direct adaption of the TV/cinema creative.
That the campaign's newer approaches were noticed were certainly evident from the discussion and debate that resulted in the local newspapers between those who felt our approaches were too liberal and those who felt we were too conservative.

In addition, because of the singular focus and widely used picture of the woman with the words "I've the AIDS virus" on her chest in the advertising campaign, a few feminists voiced that such could lead one to think that women were the only vectors of the disease. They also felt that insufficient efforts were given to women's education on AIDS. Again, an unplanned discussion resulted in the media on the advertising approach.

This campaign's post-evaluation showed that 85% of the population were aware of the advertising blitz, and a high 72% in comparison to past years, quoted the newspapers as their main source of awareness.

CONCLUSION:

In AIDS education, flexibility to move with the latest developments of HIV infection trend; new information on the knowledge, attitudes, behaviour and practices of the target groups; and the changing social-political milieu is an essential component in strategic planning including the mass media advertising programme. In Singapore, on-going efforts for more targeted messages in the appropriate media mix will continue.