

Thoughts on Creating Ongoing Behavior and Issue Advertising

By Bruce McTague

Issue-related or Cause marketing is making people aware of an issue and ultimately having these people adopt certain behavior patterns. Yes. All Issue marketing comes down to this: changing people's behavior.

Advertising the issues, or creating awareness with regard to a cause or a specific issue, is a tricky challenge for a brand (corporation). In today's world, most audiences, or receivers as we will call them later, will initially think "what's in it for the company" rather than pay attention to the merits of the message. That is why "drink responsibly" messages from alcohol manufacturers and "smoking is bad for you" messages from tobacco companies are generally viewed with cynicism and rarely change people's behavior. Research validates that people conclude "they have to say that" with reference to those brands/companies.

Is there some value to the brand in this messaging strategy? Possibly. But certainly not to meet any ROI model I know of. Do people change their behavior because of this messaging? Not likely. Messaging has to come from a credible source as well as strike a balance with emotion to create the energy to 'do something' with regard to the issue being discussed. And creating energy to do something is what we are talking about here.

Beginning thought: The study of stimulus – response.

I call the science of messaging "stimulus – response." I believe communications are developed as a stimulus to generate specific responses. Advertising should be judged in terms of how the target person responds to the communications and not in terms of what claims the marketer wants to make, i.e., it is not what we say that matters, its what they hear that matters.

As Jeremy Bullmore, past Chairman of JWT London explained:

The advertising person is a sender of stimuli and as such can learn from the comedian. The comedian is also a sender. And he has his receivers – the audience. The comedian's medium of course is his voice.

But what is the message? Well, he knows what he wants his receivers to think – he wants them to think he is funny. However, I doubt any comedian would begin his performance by saying 'ladies and gentleman the first thing you should know about me is that I am funny.'

The comedian is a far more skilled communicator than that. He knows if he wants the audience to think he is funny then he has to make them laugh. So he tells a joke and they laugh – it's their response which demonstrates he is funny. They came to that conclusion. It is their contribution not the comedian's. The communication is completed, and in a sense, only exists by the audience's contribution.

And that is because receivers are not passive – they are active. They will contribute, complete, modify, reject, select or repudiate – whether we like it or not. They do not absorb messages; they respond to stimulus, they draw their own conclusions."

In reality, the communication chain consists of five parts: sender, receiver, medium, stimulus, response. Advertising, or communications tactics in general should be based on a clear

understanding of this communications chain.

The true challenge with any cause-related (or issues-based) marketing initiative is the relationship between the sender and the receiver. The sender always carries some pre-conceived predisposition on believability or even some sense of responsibility when delivering the message. And the receiver, this person, will have a response (as noted above) based on not only the stimulus itself but also WHO is delivering the stimulus.

For example, a coal company talking about clean environment will be initially received with at best, skepticism, and at worst, be rejected – loudly rejected.

Reaching the Receiver: How Emotion Creates True Learning

Once credibility is established, the next challenge is transitioning awareness, or education, to action – let's call this true learning. Emotion is the energy required to learn anything. [Henri Laborit](#) scientifically proved in his studies on human behavior in the 1960's that there was a clear communication between learning and emotion. His research showed that without emotion learning was truly impossible. The combination of experience and its accompanying emotion (or reversed – emotional inspiration and accompanying experience) creates an imprint in an individual which becomes the foundation for ongoing behavior. This imprint influences us on an unconscious level, therefore ongoing behavior is established (the behavior is driven through subconscious rather than driven by conscious actions). [Lucas Donat](#), owner of a Direct Marketing agency, calls it Advertising 101: hook consumers emotionally and then give them a reason to validate their reason to purchase. Emotion first. Intellect second.

Creating emotion can happen in any number of ways, but creating enough emotion through advertising to actually change personal behavior is very difficult. The inspiration to act is rarely self-motivated. What people say and what people do are two extremely different things. For example, almost 70% of people say recycling is important but less than 30% of people actually recycle (Iconoculture 2007). And this is just one example. An even larger example was noted by the Global Medical Forum in 2005, "if you look at people 2 years post coronary-artery bypass grafting, 90% have not changed their lifestyle." Even though they know they have a bad disease and they know they should change their behavior, for whatever reason they don't. Intellectually they know the right answer.

This implies that not only does there have to be an intellectual trigger to act but a significant amount of emotion needs to be attached to the stimulus-to-act to generate real changes in behavior.

Creating emotion for behavior change - balancing Structure and Content

Effective communication is often less about content than it is the structure. For example, West Side Story and Romeo & Juliet tell the same story (contain the same content); however the structure creates the appeal to different audiences. When one is looking for unconscious messages the difference between Sharks & Jets and Montagues & Capulets is irrelevant. They are merely content. One can tell the same story with either, which means the content isn't essential to the meaning.

What IS important is the story's structure, the connection between the different elements. Everyone already knows this love story but it continues to emotionally charge people. Oftentimes it is not about communicating facts. Some people say "it is less important what you

say but rather how you say it.” This is a corollary to stimulus- response.

Facts are so mainstream and confusing with the advent of the internet, and yet most people today are very aware of the facts and up to date on key issues. Advertising’s role in educating people on issues has changed. In the past the mass media was the main method people used to gather knowledge, but now people use the internet to tear apart an issue thread by thread, examining each piece of information for ‘truth.’ Advertising has an opportunity here to play the role of emotional trigger for behavior.

The anti-smoking initiatives have taught us a lot about the power of communication – and which structure works – to create desired behavior patterns. These following thoughts are a sampling of conclusions reached through extensive research (CDC, Florida ant-tobacco, Ohio anti-tobacco, Tweens, omnibus behavioral research, etc.):

- Fear of self damage does not motivate behavior (“I am fully aware of the dangers and either believe I am bulletproof or it’s my body and I can do what I want to it”). Showing pictures of the repercussions of ongoing tobacco use falls on blind eyes and deaf ears.
- People know the facts and will tune out if you don’t tell them something new (“you have to tell me something other than ‘don’t smoke’ or ‘I am doing something bad for me’”).
- Non-smokers (or people who tend to exhibit what is perceived as good behavior) almost always believe they are in the minority.
- Smokers (or any person who generally believes and understands he is exhibiting negative behavior) almost always has a sense of foregone helplessness (“sure I have tried to change my behavior but I cannot do it.”)

The key to understanding how to change a person’s actions is to understand the structure the message needs to be delivered in to create the emotion necessary to trigger a true desire to take steps to change. Once personal behavior begins to reach beyond their body and affect others, emotional energy to ‘do something’ elevates to another level. Second hand smoking affects children. Being overweight translates into less energy for children. High cholesterol threatens your future with your significant other. When a person’s ability to do things with a loved one is threatened the emotional desire to act arises. Psychologically it is also easier for people to justify a change of behavior if they get to attach the infamous “I am doing it for them/him/her” to the initial steps. The emotional energy also provides the ongoing strength and focus needed to continue the behavior shift.

One-time behavior versus ongoing behavior

Incentives have proven effective in triggering an action, but are typically just an action of ‘bought behavior.’ The incentive just doesn’t carry the emotion necessary to sustain the energy it takes to truly change personal behavior. Promotions (or couponing) in the marketing world is a comparable example. Promotions are like a heroin addiction to a brand from which it is difficult for the brand to extricate themselves from the behavior pattern. People don’t purchase/use unless they are prompted by the promotion. Incentives simply lack the emotion to stimulate the ongoing behavior. Brands should beware the lure of incentives in generating the true behavior they desire. Incentives can certainly play a role in initiating a behavior pattern, but without a shift to some level of emotional investment the person will invariably succumb to old habits.

Creating a behavioral shift – making the few become many.

Oftentimes a cultural shift begins by giving voice (or permission to speak) to the issue and permitting the few who have already embraced the attitude/behavior to be recognized.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. For, indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” (Margaret Mead)

These few people most likely have no desire to be on TV or stand up in front of a room of people shouting out the benefits of their behavior, but they certainly seek acceptance rather than ridicule. Advertising (or marketing communications) can play a significant role in creating a ‘comfort zone’ for them to, at minimum, stand up and speak freely about what they believe. The brand that develops this advertising becomes part of this ‘small group of thoughtful people.’

And a quick note on *Who* has permission to say *What*.

The ability to make your brand a megaphone for this group of people is mostly about who you are as a brand already in their minds. A brand is a set of convictions that surround a product or service in the Consumer’s mind. These convictions are created through genuine involvement – a participation with this product or service either mentally or physically. Now, people like brands. They like having a comfortable relationship where there is a certain amount of trust. Maybe it is simply that with all the decisions we are forced to make every day it is nice to know there is one less decision to be made.

Because of this relationship a consumer has with a brand there are some things a brand just cannot say. Or I imagine they can say anything they want, but as in any relationship, they need to understand the repercussions of that communication. Just like a husband telling his wife “you look fat” (and the response that generates) as well as a wife telling a husband “you are mentally disturbed” (and what makes you credible to tell me that!) there are ranges of things a brand can tell the consumer and be credible.

Pushing, lecturing or forcing are rarely effective no matter the relationship but even more so when the brand – consumer relationship is suspect (or unclear).

Conclusion

Be wary with Issue advertising. The path is fraught with peril. The rewards are huge – a brand or company can truly change people’s behavior for the better. It is best to understand that you are not simply advertising to create awareness of an issue but rather to change people’s behavior. And people, in general, do not like change.

- Understand you are not having a monologue – it is a dialogue between the company/brand and the consumer.
- Understand a sender cannot have an intellectual conversation without the receiver attaching some emotion to the dialogue.
- Understand that creating emotional energy is the true hope for success. Buying initial behavior through an incentive or monetary investment may get you in the game, but you won’t win without emotional investment.

- Understand it is not just about delivering facts but how you deliver the facts that really matters (Structure vs. Content).
- Understand that people aren't stupid. They consciously decide to maintain poor/unhealthy behavior. And they need to make a conscious effort to maintain a change in behavior.

Finally, we need to understand that leaders lead. Clearly someone does need to speak out on important issues and bring them to the forefront so something can happen. The leaders rarely push, lecture or force people to do things. Just like any great dialogue, they speak the truth, they speak from the heart and they speak with their soul bared.

Do that and the world will understand you have something worth listening to. And maybe they will follow your lead.

About Bruce McTague:

In a career spanning over 20 years, I've been involved with a wide range of industries including packaged goods, restaurant, pharmaceutical, retail, business-to-business and tourism. I won't bore you with all the details, but the bottom line is I have touched so many businesses across so many categories the headline for my career should probably be "Collector of experiences and knowledge."

If you would like some additional work experience details and see what a number of people have said about me, visit my [LinkedIn Profile](#) my blog, brucemctague.com or contact me directly by [email](mailto:bruce@brucemctague.com) at bruce@brucemctague.com.