



## Education Should be Sole Purpose of PSAs

### Network promos, cause-related marketing don't meet definition

by Ruth A. Wooden

At the National Association of Broadcasters' annual meeting a number of years ago, former Advertising Council Chairman Alex Kroll (chairman emeritus, Young & Rubicam Inc.) asked the networks to donate one prime-time second each night to every million kids in America. His request stems from the Ad Council's children's initiative, wherein the Ad Council will devote the majority of its resources to developing public service messages that benefit children.

By allotting 60 seconds each night for public service advertising campaigns, the networks will participate in a massive effort to help improve the lives of American families, according to Mr. Kroll. His comments sparked a debate in the press as to the definition of public service advertising, as well as to the amount of time currently donated by the networks for PSAs.

Ms Wooden then weighed in on the subject. "On behalf of the Ad Council, the largest provider of public service advertising in the country, I would like to clarify our position," she said.

#### Not All Are Equal

All PSAs are not created equal. There are essentially three different types:

1. PSAs created for non-profit organizations that educate audiences about important issues (such as preventing drunk driving or crime) that fall into the area of the sponsor's expertise. The media have historically provided generous support for these campaigns by airing them in donated time.

2. Network promos that feature their own program stars discussing issues such as drug abuse prevention, and which sometimes refer viewers to a toll-free number to call for more information. In some cases, these spots are not affiliated with a non-profit organization and may even be paid for by a corporation.
3. Another form of "public service advertising" can be more accurately called cause-related marketing. An example of this is Anheuser-Busch's recent ads that promote responsible drinking and that are purchased by the corporation.

While we applaud these alternative forms of information dissemination, these messages (specifically network promos) do not technically comply with the networks' own definition of public service advertising: that the spots be non-sectarian, non-commercial and non-partisan. The promos are very effective methods of raising public awareness of products, networks and even social issues, but they displace the PSAs whose single purpose is to educate the public.

Why is the Ad Council concerned about other producers of "public service" messages when we are all working for a common good cause?

### **PSA Time Has Fallen**

The Ad Council has noticed an alarming trend: PSA time has decreased in the past three years from 12 seconds in prime time each hour to just 5 seconds. In contrast, the amount of time network TV devotes during prime time to promotional spots has ballooned in recent years to 12 minutes nightly. That's 4 minutes of each primetime hour.

The public has come to depend on the media for airing PSAs, and the Ad Council is considered a trusted provider of valuable information. Founded in 1942, our original mission was to mobilize Americans to support the war effort. Today, the Ad Council addresses issues of contemporary social importance. As rated time decreases, the Ad Council fears the messages of these important campaigns will not reach their target audience.

We support the networks' efforts to raise public awareness of important social issues by running network promos, but we ask that 1 of the 4 minutes devoted to promos each prime-time hour be turned over to public service messages that are sponsored by non-profit organizations, and that also depend on donated time.

Their own definition of what qualifies for public service is the message has got to be non-commercial, non-sectarian, non-partisan, What they are doing is cause-related marketing. It shouldn't displace community groups that have no other access to the media.

"Using Jimmy Smits [of ABC's "NYPD Blue"] to say something, I don't think should displace the American Cancer Society," she added.

The TV networks countered that the Ad Council's complaint is just sour grapes.

"They are playing fast and with the truth. It's very shocking," said Rosalyn Weissman, NBC's exec VP-broadcast standards. "They go out of their way to get celebrities to be spokesmen because role models get more attention, but [they] are upset when we do it."

Ms. Weissman said that by using its stars, NBC greatly increases response the messages generate. She cited an ad from the Ad Council for new teachers that drew 2,000 responses, saying a similar one featuring a network TV star drew 55,000.

### **'Adds Credibility'**

Janice Gretemeyer, ABC's VP-media relations said using stars "adds credibility to the spots." Ms. Wooden, however, warned that the networks are toying with the whole reason that PSAs work.

"PSAs are the most credible forms of advertising because they are non-commercial. That is where credibility comes from," she said.

Mr. Hundt last week, in a new letter responding to Mr. Fritts, expressed concern about the switch to network messages.

"The network promo/PSA hybrids have an obvious commercial purpose - brightening a network's brand identity and promoting a network's stars," he wrote, adding that such spots shouldn't displace PSAs.

### **Prime-Time Placement Vital**

It is vital that public service advertising air during prime-time hours in order to generate the impressive audience response network promos have received. When PSAs are run during the middle of the night, the people who most urgently need the information do not benefit. PSAs-not just promos-must receive at least a small portion of the prime-time slate designated for public service messages.

Fifty-five years ago, the broadcast industry formed a social compact with the ad industry to provide free time for ads that educate the public. But the compact has begun to fray. New competition, new consolidations, new technology and a new pace has tom at it; but the idea remains powerful and effective. We need to renew the original compact again; we need a joint venture between the networks and the public service advertising to help all Americans.

*Ms. Wooden is the former president of the Advertising Council, New York.*