

A guide.

When advertising is NOT appropriate.

Introduction.

Advertising is often the go-to tool for raising awareness about an important issue. It can be an incredibly effective and powerful way to spread the word about important issues and products, such as HIV awareness, diabetes monitors, tobacco and alcohol risks, and other health-related concerns. If it weren't for mass market multi-media campaigns informing us about public health and safety concerns, the world would be a much more dangerous place. But what if the outcome of advertising and telling people about the issue actually led to more harm being done than good?

It's not something any changemaker intends to do, but sometimes shouting loudly about an issue can lead to unintended consequences - the obvious being that the issue gets worse. When we hear about something bad, the good in us wants to do something about it and our first action is to start raising attention and telling people about it, sometimes at scale through a mass media campaign.

In this article we explore when it is right to market or advertise an issue and when it isn't, and what you should be thinking about when you add advertising, marketing and communications to your changemaker toolbox.

Why it isn't always appropriate.

Changemakers don't intend to do more harm than good when they champion a cause or communicate the negative effects of a behaviour. We therefore ask that you think first whether marketing, communications and advertising is the answer. If it is, then careful consideration must be given to the message.

My awareness of this first peaked when I was told about the negative impacts of advertising the dangers of glue sniffing in the 1980's. A strong message went out to children about the danger of sniffing glue but it led to more young people taking it up. It turns out many didn't even realise it was a thing before the adverts appeared and decided to try it.

Similarly, there were many advertisements in the 80's and 90's about climbing electric pylons. A TV advert showing young people being electrocuted actually led to more young people climbing the pylons. As shocking as it is that young people were engaging in both glue sniffing and pylon climbing, it turns out it was initially just a small minority of people doing this and the unintended consequence was that for a limited time the problem got worse.

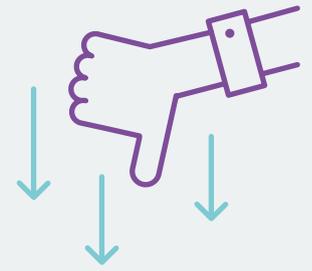
The publicity of both of these negative behaviours led to the behaviour increasing rather than reducing. Of course, today, we have not heard or seen any awareness raising campaigns on pylons or glue sniffing and although I imagine there are a small number that still engage in this behaviour it is very small and not something we particularly want to draw attention to in a mass media campaign.

The key message is this: when it comes to the promotion and advertisement of key messages relating to social issues, such as suicide, drugs, or negative health behaviours such as smoking, advertising and marketing isn't always appropriate. This is because social advertising may inadvertently influence people's behaviour to actually increase what the campaign is seeking to decrease. The Samaritans, for example, have found that there are links between media coverage of suicide and **increases in suicidal behaviour**.

Before we accept a brief to tackle an issue, we work through a number of considerations with the client. Let us share some of these with you...

1. Raising the issue directly with people may have a negative impact.

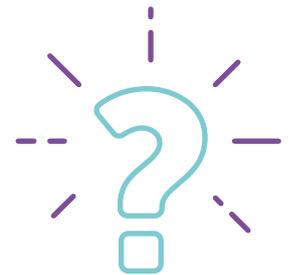
While it may seem common sense to raise awareness about certain social issues, doing so directly can actually have a negative effect or impact on people who may be vulnerable. For example, having a direct campaign which aims to reduce the number of suicides a year by informing about suicide could actually lead to an increase in suicidal behaviours from people who may already be feeling vulnerable. In their media guidelines on reporting suicide, the Samaritans explain that a misreported suicide can cause potential harm to **those who may be vulnerable**.



2. Raising the issue directly may encourage or spark their curiosity about the issue.

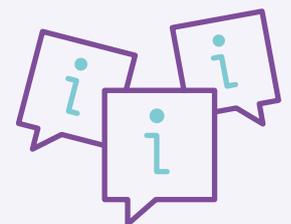
By directly raising an issue, there's a risk you may simply be encouraging people who are already curious about something to try it or spark a curiosity in others that may eventually lead them to try something.

For example, **teenagers may be curious about drugs** as they grow up and hear more about them at school or through friends, and seeing a direct campaign simply telling them that 'drugs are bad' may in fact heighten their curiosity and encourage them to try them.



3. Informing about the issue is not enough.

If your aim is to prevent or dissuade people from doing something, you need to do more than simply inform – an additional step needs to be included to help people make the decision to actively NOT do something. The level of detail you provide in a campaign may be enough to inform, but is there anything to help people make an informed decision NOT to do something?



Are you saying that we should NOT advertise?

No, that is not what we are saying. Marketing and advertising could be a very powerful way to reach your audience with an important message and if it wasn't for marketing and advertising, lots of issues would still be an issue. There is no doubt that it has helped to bring about social change in many important ways.

The bottom line is, it's easier to campaign and promote an issue to get people to actively do something rather than to campaign and promote an issue to discourage or dissuade people from something and if you have this in mind it will help steer you in the right direction. Information is important, but with advertising, there is a balance between informing and encouraging. You really have to think carefully about how to use advertising to have the desired effect.

The power of segmentation.

One of the best tools in a changemakers toolbox is segmentation. If you feel it is important to promote the risks of a negative behaviours such as smoking, drug taking and pylon climbing, then you must identify the people engaging in such behaviour, understand why they are doing it and target them directly. A message that is sent to everyone - rather than directly to the target audience could cause more harm than intended, as we have already discussed.

In a nutshell, understanding your target audience through the application of segmentation may help to design better consumer-oriented solutions rather than pursuing overgeneralised one-size-fits-all approaches. Remember that a behaviour does not define a person. Even within a community of pylon climbers or drug takers, there are many different people doing it for many different reasons and understanding why and breaking this community up into clusters and targeting them with different messages is critical. This is called segmentation.

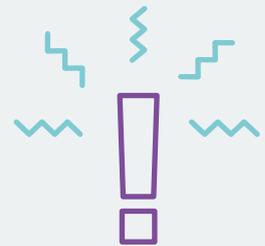
The key message is, if you intend to raise awareness of a negative behaviour, target your message at the people engaging in that behaviour only. If you have done your research and segmented your audience, this will not be too hard to do. Avoid the one message to many strategy for promoting negative behaviours.

Check out our guide to segmentation - available on our website.

What should I be doing to promote my campaign / reach my target audience?

1 ■

Focus less on explaining the topic or issue you want to discourage (such as explicit types of drugs) and more on explaining the impact and consequences surrounding the topic. For example, the Samaritans include in their media guidelines that reporting on a suicide that is **“a sensitive piece that explores the emotional devastation of a suicide on family and friends may prompt people with suicidal thoughts to reconsider or to seek help.”**



2 ■

Try to create a momentum for the campaign through more covert means. A good example of this is a substance misuse campaign carried out in Leeds that aimed to address the issue between the perceived and actual level of substance use amongst students. However, as the campaign did not want to give the impression that there is a drug problem in Leeds, the campaign focused on creating a distinctive brand that did not directly mention the campaign content to create a sense of interest and momentum with an **‘underground’ feel.**



3 ■

Use alternative methods to more directly reach and engage a very targeted audience group – those who are already aware of or affected by the issue you are seeking to tackle. This more targeted and grassroots engagement and campaigning will be more likely to effectively achieve a change in relation to the issue while actively avoiding informing those others who do not need to know about it.



For example, to address and tackle the issue of 'chem-sex' (a practice where people take a specific range of drugs to enhance sex and make them feel uninhibited, most often in the gay and bi-sexual communities), the government is using targeted interventions and collaborating with **community groups** and **sexual health services** to take action.

Whatever the issue or campaign you are seeking to address, determining and planning the most appropriate advertising and marketing strategy to reach and engage your target audience is crucial. Get in touch with the Social Change team to see how we can help you with your next project via hello@social-change.co.uk or **01522 775 060.**

We only work with organisations that want to bring about positive social change, and people who want to do good. We think this is you... Let's talk.



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