



Misplaced marketing commentary: social marketing and myths of appeals to fear

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Advertising campaign

Starting in 1989, Australia's Traffic Accident Commission undertook an intensive advertising campaign to encourage safe driving practices, featuring very strong appeals to audience fears and showing deadly outcomes from driving at excessive speeds, driving drunk or failing to wear seat belts. Following the campaign's apparent success in reducing the nation's toll of highway fatalities, the New Zealand Land Transport Safety Authority started a similar advertising effort in 1995. Unfortunately, despite government claims to the contrary, the New Zealand effort has not been as successful, with at least one academic study noting that any link between the campaign and the road toll is tenuous at best (Macpherson and Lewis, 1998).

The government people might like to presume that they have done the job if more people are "thinking" about safety, but since money for improving traffic conditions and road fatalities is finite, advertising spending logically reduces funding for other activities such as enforcement. The goal is not drivers thinking about safety, but rather, getting them to actually change unsafe behaviors. Unfortunately, any advertising researchers who believe the often repeated statements in textbooks and academic journals will also conclude that the New Zealand advertising messages were too strong and gory, not hitting on the audience's "optimal level of fear" for persuasion.

Actually, there are two problems of misplaced marketing. First, while advertising might "seem like" a good idea, not every commercial effort has the desired effect. Most public information or social marketing efforts fail because no one first tried to understand the audience. And second, the marketing researchers have institutionalized a myth that there is an optimal level of fear for audience persuasion, in turn misdirecting many social marketing campaigns.

Different versions

Over 45 years ago, three groups of subjects were presented with different versions of an illustrated lecture on dental hygiene and each version stated a different degree of harm that could be an outcome of dental neglect (Janis and Feshbach, 1953). A second study had only two forms of communication (Janis and Feshbach, 1954), and in both studies, what the researchers designated as the weaker "fear appeals" – though it should be more appropriately called threats or "appeals to audience fears" – were more effective in getting high school students to adopt the recommended toothcare procedures.

In an almost offhand comment attempting to explain the results, the authors speculated that there might exist an optimal level of fear for persuasion. This comment has formed at least a partial basis for most research in the following decades and, to this date, new academic studies start by stating either that there is some (unknown) "optimal level of fear" to maximize persuasion power, or, after listing a handful of studies, state that past research data are "mixed" in support of the existence of a moderate amount of fear being optimal for consumer persuasion. One would think that if the data are repeatedly "mixed" after 45 years, the theory would be discarded as

Emotional response

unsupported, and yet researchers have elevated the concept of an “optimal level fear” to that of dogma.

What is often lost is a basic distinction: threats illustrate undesirable consequences from certain behaviors, such as car damage, injury, or death from unsafe driving, or bad breath, illness, or cancer from cigarette smoking. However, fear is an emotional response to threats, and different people fear different things. No threat evokes the same response from all people, even within a narrowly defined demographic group. A threat is an appeal to fear, a message that attempts to evoke a fear response by showing some type of outcome that the members of the audience might want to avoid. Fear is an actual emotional response that can impel changes in attitude, behavior intentions or consumer actions. And strong threats do not necessarily evoke strong fear responses with all audiences because different people fear different things.

Many literature reviews or meta-analysis of data have all shown that the greater the actual fear engendered by a communication the greater the persuasion (e.g. Boster and Mongeau, 1984; Rotfeld, 1988; Sutton, 1982, 1992). In general, the most persuasive power is from finding that potential outcome which the audience fears the most, but the strongest or most deadly outcomes might not be readily feared.

Optimal type of threat

It is intuitively obvious that the optimal type of threat to persuade teens to stop smoking would be showing that smokers have trouble dating, not depicting a lung cancer operation which high school students with the arrogant confidence of youth would not see as personally probable or relevant. Similarly, appeals to “safe sex” are almost laughed at by today’s college students who have lived with AIDS their entire lives and consider the threat appeal as part of the wallpaper, nothing to really fear and easily ignored. In the traffic commercials, death and destruction are strong threats, but the young drivers could hardly be expected to see them as personally relevant unless they actually know someone who has suffered from a major accident.

With this understanding, the fatal flaw of the New Zealand campaign becomes apparent. In Australia, some commercials focused on law enforcement practices that were initiated or increased during the same period: hidden speed cameras that photographed fast-moving drivers and “booze buses” that would stop traffic at almost any time or location, testing all passing motorists and removing the license of any drunk driver. In New Zealand, the traffic stops by booze buses were restricted to certain areas or times of the week and, apparently, easy to avoid. Speed cameras were tied to warning signs saying the driver was entering a “speed camera area”, and being caught would only mean a fine without any points against a driver’s record.

Change attitudes

At best, advertising can only change attitudes. Law enforcement cares not about what people think as long as their behavior conforms to the law, so finite funds might first best be spent on law enforcement. Once the threat of enforcement is increased, advertising that deals with strong enforcement and the threat of fines or a lost license is realistic and relevant for all drivers. Young drivers fear a loss of money or a driver’s license more than they fear death.

Focusing on commercials of death and destruction instead of raising the threat of law enforcement, the New Zealand government’s misdirected efforts become an example of misplaced social marketing.

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