

MEDIA REVIEW

The persuasive power of truth

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The Truth - Body Bags TV Ad. An anti-tobacco campaign.

Usually in this column we review a movie or documentary that might interest the medical community. This time we make a slight departure and discuss an advertising campaign that has truly worked for the good of society.

That cigarettes can kill is obvious. But the problem is that for a lot of young people who smoke that's part of the draw. So eight years ago, when the American Legacy Foundation in Florida saw the scary rate at which youngsters were taking to smoking, they made a distress call to the hot shot ad agency Crispin Porter + Bogusky. What followed was path-breaking creativity that has practically changed the idiom of public service advertising.

The first thing Crispin did was to go into the streets and talk to these youngsters on their own turf. The kids, they learnt, were pretty knowledgeable about advertising and anti-smoking ads. They had seen all the grave warnings and imagery of blackened lungs, but it wasn't scaring them. It was then that Crispin realised that the need to rebel (against whatever) is so strong among youth that these ads were actually making smoking a bigger act of daredevilry. Clearly the approach had to change.

One other thing the Crispin team discovered when they were on the streets is that young people hate being manipulated. It then occurred to them that it might make sense to reduce the emphasis on death warnings and focus more on the dubious marketing tactics of tobacco companies to make them addicts. Thus they could unleash the pent-up teen angst against the big cigarette manufacturers.

Branding the campaign "Truth," Crispin launched a series of messages that had the look and feel of underground propaganda that purported to reveal the dark secrets of tobacco companies. Some of the ads were filmed versions of actual stunts carried out in front of the corporate headquarters of cigarette companies.

One such ad begins with a truck coming to a stop outside a skyscraper. Superimposed on the screen is the text: "Outside a

major tobacco company." We then see a bunch of youngsters open the back of the truck and take out white body bags and start to lay them on the road. A young man with a megaphone looks up into the high offices and shouts "Excuse me, excuse me, we've got a question for you..." A blurred out face of a tobacco executive appears at a window. The youngster continues "...do you know how many people tobacco kills every day?" The body bags start piling up on the street as the youngster finishes off "...you know what, we're gonna leave this here for you, so you can see what 1,200 people actually look like." The truth logo appears against a chilling visual of a street strewn with body bags.

Scripted by Chris Edwards, Ari Merkin and Bill Hollister and directed by Christian Hoagland, this is a tour de force in public service advertising. Shot in stark black and white using shaky, guerilla style cinematography, the film unsettles you with its documentary realism. Obviously a film like this needs no music. The sound design is enough to punctuate the images. The end effect is a mixture of amazement and outrage. Not surprising, then, that this film has won countless awards.

Then again, the true success of this campaign is not its awards tally. It is the social movement that it unleashed, with youngsters spreading the truth amongst themselves. In the initial years smoking declined by 38 per cent among Florida teenagers. That's why the Truth campaign has been taken to elsewhere in the United States as well and is considered the most successful social marketing campaign ever.

Crispin believes that it is easier to get youngsters to do something, rather than not do something. By shifting the message from "don't smoke" to "protest against manipulative tobacco companies" they were able to win the approval of the new generation. And that is why Truth works.

To view the ad, search for "The Truth - Body Bags TV Ad" at youtube.com.

Thomas Xavier is an advertising professional with interests in feature films and music.