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Messages that Made the Difference (Part I)

How important is the right message? In Texas, an anti-littering slogan saved the state over \$4-million last year alone. "Don't mess with Texas," however, is far more than just a successful public service campaign. It's a case in point for aiming your message at the highest core value you can.

After years of collecting more and more litter from state highways, the Texas Department of Transportation decided it was time to stem the surging tide of cigarette butts, soda cans, and old tires. In 1985, TxDOT selected an advertising agency based in Austin and challenged them to produce a public service campaign that would reduce litter by a minimum of 5% in the first year. On January 1, 1986, the first television public service announcement aired featuring the rock-blues guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan. Twelve months later, litter had decreased statewide by an astonishing 29%. The campaign's unequivocal success could be explained in four words, "Don't Mess with Texas," a remarkably effective slogan that remains the anti-littering battle cry throughout the Lone Star state today.

For public interest groups, "Don't Mess with Texas" is a success story worth examining because it demonstrates how important a carefully crafted message can be. Had Stevie Ray

Vaughan looked into the camera and said, "Come on, everybody. Let's put litter in its place!" it's doubtful anybody would be writing about that campaign today. But when Stevie Ray uttered those magical four words, he tapped into something deep in the heart of every Texan: *state pride*. While celebrities such as George Foreman and Lyle Lovett would follow him on the airwaves and over \$100 million in broadcast time would be donated in succeeding years, the power of the campaign flowed from the message.

GSD&M was the advertising agency responsible for the slogan, and according to Linda Levitt, TxDOT's current program manager for the campaign, the agency broke new ground by taking "an advertising approach to a public concern." Rather than assuming (a) littering is bad, (b) everyone knows it, and therefore (c) all TxDOT needs is a creative way to tell people to *stop* littering, the agency did market research, conducting focus groups in which they could talk to Texans about litter. The conversations were eye-opening.

"People didn't think it was wrong," Levitt recounted. "They assumed someone was going to clean up after them." The problem boiled down to personal responsibility, or more specifically, the average Texan's failure to see his (or her) contribution to the problem. The research also helped narrow the target: men ages 18-34 were identified as the primary sources of litter, so whatever message GSD&M developed would have to appeal to this group first and foremost.

And here is where the agency's creative team struck gold. They knew their challenge was awakening a sense of personal responsibility in the target, but the question remained: how? GSD&M could have used an environmental rationale - "Let's keep Texas clean!" - which would have been both a reasonable and well-worn path for an anti-littering campaign. It also would have been an improvement over "Cleaning Up Litter on Your Highways Costs You" and "LITTERING IS UNLAWFUL," two bland messages currently in use on highway signage. Fortunately, the creative team did some free-range thinking of its own, searching for a message that would matter most to the target. When they ultimately hit upon "Don't Mess with Texas," they had a perfectly-tuned, macho message that would connect with just about every 18-34 year old screaming down Interstate 35, ready to toss an empty can of Bud out of his pick-up's window.

A radio and television campaign featuring this slogan was developed



for key broadcast markets, but first the spots were tested on TxDOT's 25 district engineers - and they hated them! Undaunted, the department forged ahead, and the public service directors who would make the ultimate decision about running the PSAs loved the campaign. In the 14 years since its launch, "Don't Mess with Texas" has garnered \$117 million in donated air time. A 1998 research study revealed that 96% of Texans

surveyed were familiar with the slogan and, more importantly, this awareness was translating into real-world results. Littering has declined a stunning 70% since the campaign began, and TxDOT estimated a savings of \$4.13 million in clean-up costs last year alone.

TxDOT changed advertising agencies in 1998, but this was one more indicator of the campaign's strength. "When we changed," Levitt told me with a smile in her voice, "every agency in the state said they wouldn't touch the slogan. They told us, 'Don't mess with Don't Mess with Texas.'" For public interest groups looking to reach more people more effectively, I have similar advice: don't forget "Don't Mess with Texas." It's a valuable reminder to learn everything you can about your target audience - even when the message seems obvious. With that knowledge in hand, you can identify the highest core value relevant to your issue and aim your message squarely at it. Do that, and you'll clean up, too.

Special thanks to Linda Levitt and Anne Cook of the Texas Department of Transportation for their help. Photos by Geoff Appold/TxDOT.

free-range follow-up

Which Message Matters More?

In an essay entitled, "Defining the Front End of Strategic Communications," Susan Nall Bales writes, "In essence, the art of strategic communications is using one myth to trump another. Each myth or metaphor reconfigures experience and realigns opinion with a different set of core values." This principle is alive and kicking in the Presidential primary battle between Al Gore and Bill Bradley. Consider the competing myths which emerged in New Hampshire and will undoubtedly continue to battle during the campaign:

GORE:	← Candidate →	BRADLEY:
"I stayed and fought."		"You stayed too long and fought too much."
When you (Bill) fled congress, I remained to fight Gingrich and uphold the principles of the Democratic party.	← Message →	You (all) are part of a broken system, and all you did was perpetuate a battle with the Republicans that goes nowhere.
I'm tenacious, dogged, trustworthy.	← Myth →	Government doesn't work, and DC insiders don't get it.

To my mind, Bradley's myth trumps Gore's because - like "Don't Mess with Texas" - it taps into something much deeper within the electorate's collective psyche: distrust of big government. Gore's organization, money and momentum may carry the day, but I give Bradley the win in this message battle.

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