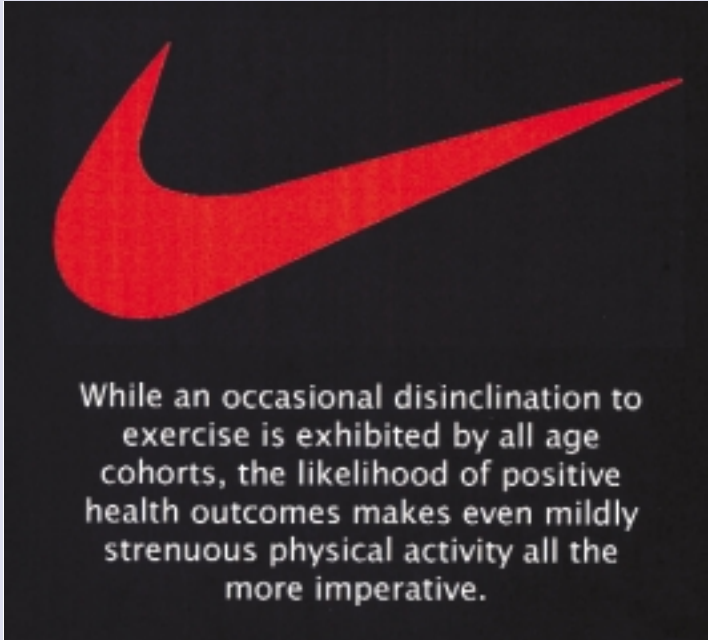


What if a nonprofit had created Nike's slogan?



Fifty million adult Americans read at an eighth grade level or lower, and another forty million read at a fifth grade level or lower (according to the National Adult Literacy Survey of 1993.) If you've been thinking about rewriting your materials to ensure wider comprehension, stop thinking. **Just do it.**

Online Help for Your Next StarSearch

Wondering how to reach a particular celebrity? The web site *WhoRepresents.com* can be an invaluable resource. Just enter your desired star's name and the site produces contact information for agents, managers and more. It's a free service, but users are limited to 10 searches per day. Happy hunting!

Free-range thinking™ is a monthly newsletter for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively. For a free subscription, send your request to: andy@agoodmanonline.com or call 213.386.9501. Back issues are available on the web at www.agoodmanonline.com
 Newsletter edited by Carolyn Ramsay.



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 GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

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THE MESSAGE

They Couldn't Escape

Shaken baby syndrome is one of those disturbing problems most people would rather not hear about. So the Shaken Baby Association made sure its audience didn't have a choice.

You're listening to the radio as you drive to work and a commercial break begins with the sound of a crying baby. It's annoying, frankly, so you change the station, except that same child is still wailing away a little further up the dial. You keep punching buttons but you cannot escape the incessant cries until finally, on the tenth or eleventh station, it stops and you hear a voice say, "No matter how long she cries, or how frustrated you get, never, *ever* shake a baby."

At precisely 7:20 am on August 14, 2001, thousands of radio listeners

in Milwaukee had this memorable experience. At the request of the Shaken Baby Association, eighteen stations aired the same public service announcement at the same time, trapping listeners in a "radio roadblock" and ensuring that SBA's message was heard. In the seven months before the roadblock, 26 incidents of shaken baby syndrome were reported by local hospitals. In the four months following, no incidents were reported. How this remarkably effective roadblock was assembled at *no cost* to SBA is a story worth stopping for.



► Shaken baby syndrome (SBS) occurs when a caregiver becomes frustrated to the point of picking up a child – usually 6 to 12 months old – and shaking the infant until significant physical damage has been sustained. This abuse can lead to brain damage, respiratory problems, long-term learning and developmental disabilities, and even death. Diagnosis of SBS remains an imperfect science, so estimates of cases nationwide vary widely. The Brain Injury Association of America, for example, posts estimates ranging from 3,000 to 50,000 annually on its web site.

The Shaken Baby Association was founded in 1998 by Margie Rehm and Wendi Schreiter, two Milwaukee area mothers whose babies were shaken by their caregivers. SBA began promoting awareness of the problem by conducting workshops in schools with students of babysitting age, holding press conferences whenever clusters of shaken baby syndrome were reported by local hospitals, and by producing a television public service announcement that aired on regional cable systems. Like many small nonprofits, though, its communications budget was minimal, confining SBA's outreach efforts to modest low-cost or no-cost initiatives.

Hoping to add muscle to her marketing efforts, Rehm approached Gary Mueller, creative director of BVK, a Milwaukee-based advertising agency. "I was prepared to say we were too busy," says Mueller, whose agency took on ten to twelve cause campaigns a year. "But Margie sat in my office and told the story of her son, who was shaken, and I couldn't walk away from that." In 1999, he joined the SBA board of directors. "I was charged with raising awareness in an unbelievably impactful way," he says, pausing for effect, "and with no money."

Given limited resources, Mueller set about the task of creating a radio commercial that, in his own words, "if you hear it one time, you'd never forget it." Having a baby girl at home gave Mueller a first-hand feel for the unnerving effect of sustained crying, so he recorded his daughter's voice and just let the tape run – for ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds, on and on until just about any normal person would feel the same sense of frustration that for some caregivers was triggering a disastrously cruel reaction. After fifty full seconds of crying, he added only a short but emphatic announcer's voice warning listeners to never, *ever* shake a baby.

Local radio stations hated the spot. "Program directors told me people would change the station," say Mueller, and after two or three pitches, he gave up on the idea. "I wasn't going to beat my head against the wall," he says. The PSA went onto the shelf in Mueller's office at BVK and remained there for nearly two years.

By the summer of 2001, though, the incidence of shaken baby syndrome was spiking again in the Milwaukee area. Over two dozen cases had been reported by area hospitals since January, motivating SBA to get moving with a serious public awareness campaign. Mueller pulled his radio commercial off the shelf and played it for Pam Mufson, a colleague at BVK. He conceded that the program directors were probably right: listeners would, in fact, be inclined to switch to another station once the crying started to antagonize them. Mufson replied with the magic words that would set Mueller off in a new direction: "Why don't you put it on *all* the stations at the same time?"

Mueller approached the managers of the most highly rated stations in Milwaukee *not* with a request to air a PSA, but with a pitch to co-sponsor a unique radio event that would have the whole town talking. "Once I got the top guys," he says, "the rest came on board quickly." While very little good has come of consolidation within the radio industry, in Milwaukee it allowed Mueller to line up eighteen radio stations – covering roughly 95% of the listening audience – by talking with only six station managers. The roadblock was arranged in a matter of days and a date was set for August.

In the week leading up to the event, SBA sent out press releases to all area media, and the organization's representatives were interviewed on local TV, radio, and print outlets. The roadblock generated awareness for shaken baby syndrome before, during, and after the actual airing of the PSA, and the out-of-pocket costs for SBA were zero. Most important of all, reports of the syndrome in the Milwaukee area hospitals abruptly ceased.

On April 9, 2002, the Wisconsin Children's Trust fund coordinated a radio roadblock in Madison to expand awareness of shaken baby syndrome in that metropolitan area. Six months later, the Task Force on Family Violence in Milwaukee roadblocked eight stations in morning drive to promote prevention of domestic violence. And Mueller says the SBA is currently planning the first statewide roadblock for spring 2004.

To retain their effectiveness, radio roadblocks should be used selectively and sparingly, but recent experience indicates they are both replicable and adaptable to a wide range of issues. Hopefully, that's one message nonprofit communicators everywhere will receive loud and clear. ■

THE MESSAGE They Couldn't Escape

