

Emotion, Reason, and How News Coverage Freaks You Out

What scares you more: a shark attack or skin cancer? If you're like most people, you chose the danger far *less* likely to rear its ugly (not to mention toothy) head. That's because human beings are not entirely rational when it comes to things that may hurt or kill us, and the media feed our irrational impulses by disproportionately covering the sensational. Consider the numbers below from a Harvard School of Public Health Study:

Danger	Chance of Injury	Chance of Death or Illness	Number of Articles
Shark Attack	1 in 6,000,000	1 in 578,000	276
West Nile Virus	1 in 68,500	1 in 1,000,000	2,240
Boating Accidents	1 in 64,500	1 in 400,900	1,658
Snakebite	1 in 41,300	1 in 19,300,000	109
Amusement Park Rides	1 in 34,800	1 in 72,300,000	101
Fireworks	1 in 32,400	1 in 71,200,000	59
Lyme Disease	1 in 18,100	(no record of fatalities)	47
Heat Exposure	(no reliable statistics)	1 in 950,000	229
Lawn Mowers	1 in 5,300	(no record of fatalities)	53
Bicycle Accidents	1 in 1,700	1 in 578,000	233
Food Poisoning	1 in 800	1 in 55,600	257
Skin Cancer	1 in 200	1 in 29,500	102

Excerpted from "Never Bitten, Twice Shy: The Real Dangers of Summer," The New York Times, August 9, 2003) The last column notes the number of articles written by major US newspapers and wire services between Memorial Day and Labor Day during the summer of 2002.

And the relevance to your work? Simply a reminder that emotions deeply influence how we think and what we believe, no matter what the numbers may say. ■

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When the Answer Is a Question

In the mid-1990s, there was no shortage of organizations working on behalf of children in Kansas City, Missouri. Hospitals and school districts, Boys & Girls Clubs and YMCAs, foundations and nonprofits all offered a wide range of worthwhile programs and services. And yet, there was disquiet in the air. "We were holding our own," says Jim Caccamo, former president of the Partnership for Children, "but we were just treading water. I was struggling with the question of how to make greater strides on behalf of our kids."

David Westbrook, a local marketing and PR specialist with clients including the American Medical Association, National Public Radio, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, had similar concerns. "I was making a speech

back then," he recalls, "and

Since 1997, the efforts of youth advocates in Kansas City have been bolstered by a campaign that has elevated one question above all others:

Is it good for the children?

I said, 'Wouldn't it be great if we could begin to guide all of our decisions, personal or professional, corporate or public, by the discipline and science of a single question:

is it good for the children?'" Little did Westbrook realize at the time that this question would ultimately be the answer that Caccamo and many others were seeking. ►



► At around the same time that Westbrook was giving his speech, Caccamo received a letter from a colleague at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. Attached to the letter was an article about the Hopi Indians describing their custom of meeting at the start of each new season to review the practices of the tribe. According to the story—and the reason it was sent Caccamo’s way—the Hopis would not consider any significant change without asking one question first: Is it good for the children?

Since Westbrook served on Caccamo’s board at the Partnership for Children, it was inevitable that the two would compare notes and realize they had arrived at the same point. While each suspected that a citywide campaign posing this question could enhance the efforts of youth advocates of all stripes, both men were inclined to proceed cautiously. Using a \$50,000 grant from a local philanthropist, they surveyed Greater Kansas City residents and learned that over 90% of adults polled agreed that the question, “Is it good for the children?” would be an excellent way to promote dialogue.

Buoyed by this response, Caccamo spent the next six months talking to community leaders to ensure that the question—if heavily promoted as he and Westbrook envisioned—would support programs and initiatives benefiting Kansas City’s children. “People liked its simplicity,” Caccamo

reports. “Whether you answered it affirmatively or negatively, it meant there had to be some kind of dialogue.” Caccamo and his colleagues interviewed 400 civic leaders, asking each if he or she would personally adopt this question and use it at home, at work, or both. Although formal pledges weren’t requested, a solid foundation for the campaign was being poured one interview at a time.

With funding from the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, Kansas Health Foundation, Kauffman Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the United Way, the Partnership for Children launched the “#1 Question Campaign” in April 1997 with an event at the Kansas City Zoo. Westbrook’s firm, Corporate Communications Group, cleverly melded a question mark, exclamation point, and the number one into a visual icon that would soon become ubiquitous throughout the city.

With an advertising budget of \$1.7 million over three years, Westbrook was able to

produce and run 15-second television ads in what he describes as “a saturation campaign reminiscent of the last two weeks of an election.” He tapped recognizable leaders of the business, education, health, and faith communities, as well as neighborhood leaders and local media stars to ask the question and then deliver the equally important message, “It’s your decision.” Radio, print ads, and billboards were also employed.

By June 2000, Caccamo had commitments from over 700 organizations that had officially adopted the #1 Question. These commitments were reflected in many ways: the city council put it on all purchase orders, religious organizations printed it on Sunday bulletins, school districts added it to their stationery. And the question kept popping up at meetings. Westbrook recalls one such meeting in 1998 in which a local CEO announced a summer schedule giving employees a 4-day week in return for working from 7:00 am until 5:30 pm each

day. “A grandmother in the back asked, ‘Is it good for the children?’” says Westbrook, “and it absolutely changed the whole meeting.” The discussion turned to issues around daycare and carpools, and the proposed plan—which clearly would not be good for children—was dropped.

During the first three years of the campaign, the University of Kansas conducted telephone surveys to monitor public awareness. More than 70% of residents polled indicated they had heard of the #1 Question,

80% said they would use it in their daily lives, and over 50% believed it would improve the lives of children in their area. The data is not as clear on that last point—largely because such broad societal changes are always difficult to quantify—but there are some impressive results.

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Prior to the launch of the #1 Question campaign, immunization rates among children in the inner city were around 60%; three years into the campaign, they had increased to 90%. A conceal-and-carry gun referendum heavily backed by the NRA in 1999 went down to defeat because, as Westbrook cites, opponents used the #1 Question to reframe the debate from gun control (which was not popular) to public safety for children. Perhaps the best indicator of success, however, can be found in Kansas City’s taxicabs.

“The first focus group I would convene to find out about life in any city would be cab drivers,” Westbrook says, chuckling but far from joking. “They can tell you what’s *really* going on. And after this campaign was launched, even the cabbies would tell you this is a great place for kids. We’re really devoted to our kids here.” ■

(To learn more about The #1 Question Campaign—which is ongoing in the Greater Kansas City area—visit the Partnership for Children’s website, www.pfc.org, and click on the “Initiatives” link on the home page.)

