



Two Million Hits In One Week

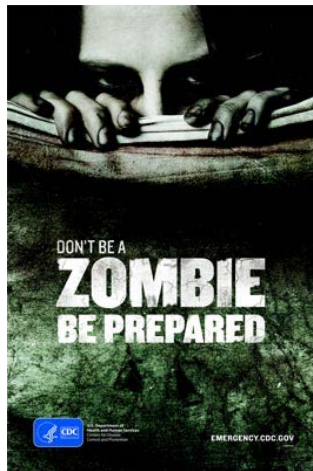
Infectious humor and some real guts help the CDC create a viral sensation.

If you ever had an edgy out-of-the-box idea but abandoned it because you just *knew* your organization would never approve, this is a story for you. There are some clever folks at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - a federal agency not generally known for wildly creative thinking - who have felt your pain but also know there is hope. You just need a few zombies on your side.

The story begins in April at the Office of Public Health and Preparedness Response within CDC. David Daigle, associate director of communications, had gathered his team to talk about hurricane season. Keeping Americans safe and healthy when hurricanes hit is one of CDC's many responsibilities. Convincing Americans to read blogs about preparing for hurricanes is one of the agency's annual challenges. Despite the subject matter, the blogs tend to be dry stuff.

As Daigle's staff brainstormed ways to make the hurricane preparedness post a must-read, one team member recalled some tweets that attracted attention at CDC after the Japan earthquake. Several tweeters had asked if the increased release of radiation could spawn a new wave of zombies. Serious or otherwise, the tweets were a reminder that zombies are a hot topic, and in short order an idea was hatched linking emergency preparedness to the walking dead.

Daigle brought the idea to his boss, Dr. Ali Khan. Keep in mind that besides being Daigle's supervisor, Dr. Khan is also a former Rear Admiral and the Assistant Surgeon General. Now, put yourself in



November 2011

Two Million Hits in One Week

[How the CDC created a viral sensation](#)

Do You Know the Four Connecting Points?

[Learn the keys to more strategic communications in December](#)

Beth Drews Scholarships for 2012

[Winners to be announced in our January issue](#)



About Us

Daigle's shoes and pitch this idea: a blog post about preparing for a zombie invasion with advice that is also useful in preparing for hurricanes. That's right: zombies. On CDC's website.

Fortunately for Daigle, Dr. Khan has a healthy sense of humor as well as a taste for movies like *Resident Evil*. Even better, Dr. Khan is inclined to take chances on ideas that he believes are fundamentally sound and has the authority to approve blog posts without consulting higher-ups.

On Monday, May 16, 2011, the blog post "[Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse](#)" went live on CDC's website. The post included such practical bits of advice as: "Although you're a goner if a zombie bites you, you can use these supplies to treat basic cuts and lacerations that you might get during a tornado or hurricane."



Dr. Ali Khan

Almost immediately, negative comments poured in. "There were a number of comments about government employees not doing their job, and there were personal attacks on me," Dr. Khan told me. "But the lesson to be learned here is that if you're not willing to take any criticism, you shouldn't be in this business." Dr. Khan stuck by his decision, and Daigle's team continued to monitor public reaction.

By the end of day one, the post had received 10,000 views. By Wednesday, the number had climbed to 30,000 and the volume of traffic crashed the blog's server. The server was quickly fixed, more capacity was added, and within a week, the number of views passed two million. The media picked up on the story (no surprise there) and over 3,000 articles, broadcasts and other forms of coverage blasted it worldwide. According to Daigle, the publicity was worth \$3.4 million, and the entire cost of the campaign to CDC was \$87 - the price for a stock photo of zombies.

CDC may have set a record for the lowest cost-per-view, but an important question remains. Have all those hits translated into better preparedness for hurricanes? That was the initial objective, after all, so when I got Daigle and Dr. Khan on the phone recently, I put the question to them. "We conducted a survey of people who read the blog," Daigle told me. "Over 90% said that they now know how to make an emergency kit or devise an emergency plan."

Fortified by that data, CDC's self-named "Zombie Task Force" is relentlessly lurching forward. In October, CDC released a graphic novella, "[Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic](#)," and over 40,000 copies were downloaded in three weeks.

At the end of our interview, I asked Dr. Khan if he had any advice for other public interest communicators who may have outside-the-box ideas of their own. "If you have a good idea," he said, "don't give up if the first person you pitch it to doesn't go for it. Just remember what you're trying to achieve, what your core mission is."

And if zombies don't fit your mission, there are always werewolves.

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Do You Know The Four Connecting Points?

Learn the keys to more strategic communications in our December webinar.

Did you know there are four points of connection between you and the audience you'd like to reach? If you know what they are, you can plan any form of outreach to touch all four points, but if you don't, you may be giving your audience an opportunity to disconnect and walk away.

In our two-hour online class ***Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter***, we'll identify The Four Connecting Points and show how three classic public interest campaigns used them to achieve remarkable results. In this process, we'll cover:

- The basics of framing
- Message creation and delivery
- An easy-to-use template for campaign design



Classes will be held on December 5th and 12th from 11a-12n PT each day (2-3p ET). Tuition is \$250 per student, and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more. To register online, [click here](#).

[^ back to top](#)

Beth Drews Scholarships for 2012

Twenty winners will be announced in our January edition.

Thanks again to all the foundation representatives who nominated outstanding nonprofit professionals for Beth Drews Scholarships. The nominating period ended on October 28, and we are now reviewing the candidates. We will announce the names of the twenty scholarship recipients in the January edition of *free-range thinking*, so if you've been nominated or submitted a candidate, please watch this space for more details.



[^ back to top](#)

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