

# Making Strategic Communications Work to Prevent Elder Abuse

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**ABSTRACT.** With more and more noise hitting the public, more tasks to accomplish, and limited resources, elder abuse prevention organizations must speak with one voice and act in solid partnership. This article touches on processes, systems, procedures, and resources necessary to develop strategic communications plans that are single in strategy and consistent in objectives and image. While the problem of elder abuse has been primarily covered in the academic and health professional press, this article focuses on the usage of mainstream marketing and communications principles to offer suggestions on how to achieve broad national awareness of the issues. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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The American Marketing Association defines marketing as “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives.”

For decades, social and cause-related marketing professionals have been using mainstream marketing and communication techniques to make people aware of and change the way they behave toward a variety of social issues. An excellent example is The Partnership for a Drug Free America® national outreach campaign of advertisements and public service announcements. The Partnership’s TV ads were hard-hitting, creative, and persuasive. The message was very simple: “Drugs are dangerous.” And, while one could argue the finer points of the actual outcomes of the war on drugs, there is no doubt that this effort provided a tremendous amount of public attention to the cause.

Richard Earle, in his book *The Art of Cause Marketing: How to Use Advertising to Change Personal Behavior and Public Policy*, cites many examples of commercial strategies being used to affect behavior change. The American Cancer Society’s Yul Brynner commercial urging people not to smoke, the National Forest Service’s “Smokey Bear” forest fire prevention campaign (the longest running campaign in history), the Keep America Beautiful “Crying Indian” campaign, and the United Negro College Fund’s “A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Waste” campaign are all great examples of simple, creative strategies used to make people aware of social issues.

### **COMMUNITY PREVENTION EFFORTS**

Throughout the country, advocates and prevention experts share the view that education and awareness are critical to elder abuse prevention. Grassroots inroads are beginning to be made.

In 1999, for example, awareness of elder abuse issues was relatively limited in North Central California, and certainly not considered a major concern by the average citizen. This is, in large part, due to the fact that most senior adult victims do not act on the abuse, and it is, therefore, underreported. A group of Sacramento and Yolo County public officials and representatives of private business and social service organizations

decided to change the landscape, and chose to do so by launching a multi-media regional campaign. The campaign, which used billboards, bus shelters, radio commercials, and flyers, was unveiled at a late 1999 news conference in a senior citizen center by the Sacramento County District Attorney, Yolo County Supervisor, and Sacramento County Health Director.

The creative solution focused on portrayals of elder abuse victims. The look sought to capture the sense of vulnerability and sadness experienced by abused seniors, and to generate outrage by society and family members who may be the ones to witness and report on the crime. Outdoor public service advertising featured portraits of women with the tagline, "Elder abuse is shameful. So is not reporting it."

The elder abuse prevention campaign, produced by Sacramento-based advertising agency Runyon Saltzman & Einhorn, Inc., publicized two emergency 24-hour hotlines, one for Sacramento County, the other for Yolo County. The campaign prompted a spike in elder abuse reports. During the six months, the two counties experienced three times the number of reported cases as in comparable earlier periods.

### ***WIDENING AWARENESS: THE NATIONAL CHALLENGE***

At least one out of 20 older Americans will be a victim of financial abuse, neglect, psychological mistreatment, or physical abuse, and many more victims will go unnoticed because of fear, shame, or embarrassment. Sadly, most victims depend on their abuser for care, help, and support. Abuse often goes undetected and unreported. In many circumstances, the abuse is not clear to the victim or abuser.

At the same time, partly as a result of medical advances, people aged 75 and older now represent the fastest-growing segment of our population. By 2020, America's population of senior citizens is expected to double. Policy-makers and local service providers are recognizing the need for increased awareness and public information about the many issues affecting older people.

In December 2001, the National Center on Elder Abuse conducted a National Policy Summit on Elder Abuse, which convened more than 80 experts from all over the country. The group's task was to develop a "National Action Agenda on Elder Abuse" and publish a blueprint outlining the issues and priorities needed to implement an aggressive agenda for the benefit of elder abuse prevention.

The resulting action agenda suggested ways in which elder abuse prevention coalitions, teams, planning councils, and advocacy organizations could get involved. Unanimously, the group of 80 professionals selected as the top priority the need to develop and implement a sustained national strategic communication program to educate the public on elder abuse.

Just exactly what is needed to execute a national communications outreach effort? Even more important, just exactly what do we mean by strategic communications?

### ***STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS***

Strategic communications, simply defined, is nothing more than a strict planning process. It defines a strict scheme for planning and executing a campaign to address the issues affecting elder abuse and neglect and makes strategic planning an essential function of the process that will eventually deliver a cohesive national communication plan. The process itself creates a road map by which communication strategies are carefully crafted, objectives are developed, target audiences are strictly defined, research and information needs are identified, and an optimal mix of marketing activities and communications strategies and tactics are crafted to cost-effectively deliver the desired outcomes. Importantly, this road map clearly defines those desired outcomes and establishes yardsticks and evaluation methods to measure success.

Another important function for this blueprint is to define the key participants and establish the roles and responsibilities for them. A planning framework for an elder abuse prevention campaign should be based on the premise that effective communication programs include collaboration from all levels.

Usually, a communications plan is the outcome of a large number of actions taken by a great number of people. Successful programs often are those that emanate at the grassroots level, with high levels of involvement from the people that come face to face with the issues. So it is important that the blueprint address how input from the different regional and local elder abuse groups and constituencies will be included in the plan's development.

Ultimately, it will be everyone's plan, so participation in its development is essential to success. A simple way to think about participatory planning models is to focus on Web-based interactive methodologies. These methods utilize surveys and other mechanisms, delivered over

the Internet, to elicit input and gather opinions from the key state and local organizations involved in elder abuse prevention. Online surveys and communication can provide a very cost-effective way to help define the issues from the ground up and give planners a comprehensive situational overview of local and state organizations.

While it is premature for this article to offer specific planning methods, these ideas suggest an example of how an inclusive planning model could be implemented. Web-based feedback mechanisms have proven very effective in searching out ongoing information from the field for a myriad of organizations both in the non-profit and commercial environments. Today, many enterprises use the Internet to provide sales force training, product information, and incentives. Furthermore, organizations can continually interact with their field organizations providing a motivational tool designed to increase their effectiveness.

For a communications campaign to have an impact in today's highly competitive, over-communicated environment, organizations must ensure that their field teams are properly motivated and have the materials necessary to execute the programs. Web-based tools provide an efficient channel to inform, receive feedback, and distribute materials and information.

Additionally, a planning blueprint should define a strict decision-making and work approval processes to ensure consistent messaging and sustained activity. Elder abuse prevention leaders should consider appointing a small group of no more than 10 individuals representing all constituencies to plan and approve all the work.

Research plays an important role in helping communication planners understand target audiences. While this article will not have an in-depth discussion of research methodologies, it is important to mention that applied research is an essential tool for decision-making. Whether to gain understanding of the problem through primary (survey) or secondary (existing) research, to test for awareness levels of the problem before and after a campaign is executed so effectiveness can be measured, or to make sure a creative approach and message is credible and persuasive using insight from focus groups, research points the way to effective communication development.

Another important concept in the development of successful communications plans is the notion of "integration" of the different components of a campaign. Plans should be developed to reach different audiences in numerous ways using multiple marketing communications techniques and channels. Techniques include public service advertising, public relations, direct marketing, Web-based database marketing,

promotion, collateral materials, and training support and services for state and community level organizations.

A strategic communications plan consists of a variety of integrated elements, or components, designed to make us look at the effort as a whole. Integrated plans view a campaign the way a consumer would see it: as a stream of information from indistinguishable sources.

It is important to understand that different elements in a campaign are designed to achieve specific objectives which all work towards cost-effectively achieving a program's single communications objective. The key challenge for the planner is the orchestration of all these elements, so they deliver consistent messages that persuade and inspire action. An important factor is to understand how each of the elements of a strategic communications program work towards achieving that single goal.

Typically, the strategic communications plan will outline in detail how and when different communications elements are paired. For example, in many campaigns, public relations tactics, such as media relations, editorial coverage, special events, etc., are introduced first in order to provide visibility, credibility, and third party endorsements for a cause. Public relations can also establish the organization as the principal source of information on the subject.

For a cause like elder abuse, it is critical that a single central organization act as the clearinghouse of reliable, accurate information. Public relations techniques are crucial to any strategic communications program's ability to create a positive attitude toward a cause.

Advertising techniques, on the other hand, are deliberate. Public service advertising provides perhaps the most powerful tool to move people to action. With advertising, a cause has control over the timing, content, and creative product. Importantly, it can be emotional and hard-hitting to create as much impact as possible. The U.S. Department of Transportation's "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk" campaign is an excellent example of how hard-hitting, deliberate advertising can create attention to a social problem.

### ***PREVENTION MARKETING: BREAKING THROUGH THE CLUTTER***

With the current information overload, it is no longer possible to expect that one element of the communication mix can do the job, be it public service advertising, public relations, or online interactive pro-

grams. With so many messages trying to get through to the consumer, single-channel strategies are doomed to fail. Identifying the correct channels and delivering the correct mix is a critical task in the development of strategic communication. A solid planning process should deliver creative materials that reach and motivate the target audiences through a mix of carefully selected channels. For example, a TV commercial invites a visit to a Web site to get printed materials and more information, which, in turn, provides a toll-free number where questions can be asked and answered.

Strategically integrating the elements of a campaign also forces us to orchestrate marketing and communication activities to creatively and consistently deliver messages single in strategy and voice, and with clear objectives of what we set out to accomplish. Of course, in today's environment, our programs not only must deliver awareness, but more importantly, they must elicit a response or behavior from the target audience. And, these outcomes must be carefully tracked to make sure they are achieving what they set out to do.

Integrated messages should be explicitly designed to "sell" elder abuse prevention through mass communication strategies that not only make people aware of the problem, but also encourage and induce the general public and state and local organizations to take actions in the prevention of elder abuse.

A communication campaign for elder abuse prevention, be it through public service advertising, public relations, or outreach programs, has to do more than just create awareness. It has to be communication that motivates people to act, fosters a relationship with the cause, and generates buy-in for the program from state organizations and community coalitions. It should include this notion of integrating all the components, and developing processes to create and enhance relationships with audiences.

Strategic communications must also deliver a framework for promoting cooperation between state, regional, and community organizations, and for building successful social partnerships with corporate and private sector businesses and organizations. An integrated and inclusive communications plan must first and foremost connect the dots among all the activities being undertaken at the state and local levels. These "connecting lines," if you will, are strategies that will provide planning direction, unify, and give the effort a voice and personality. Just like "D.A.R.E." Just like "Child Abuse." Just like "Nike."

The strategic communications plan must also create a relationship between the cause and the different audiences. But, then, what do we mean by “relationships,” and how can this task be accomplished?

### ***BRANDING AND MESSAGING***

In the commercial world we talk about developing brands that create and nurture lasting images. A brand, in commercial terms, is the relationship that exists between a consumer and a product. It is that product’s image, reputation, and identity.

Organizations on the frontlines, dealing with elder abuse prevention, must find a voice just like organizations which are committed to the prevention of child abuse and teen pregnancy have done. The brand, or identity, for elder abuse prevention will then become the comprehensive strategy that communicates long-term goals and organizational strengths. It will foster a relationship between the organization and its many constituents. It will define the organization’s identity, promote a positive image for the program, and build public recognition and support. The brand defines what an organization is and what it represents. It creates a set of expectations and a promise in the mind of consumers.

There are many reasons elder abuse prevention programs need a centralized, uniform, cohesive national identity or brand. First and most important is to increase understanding of the organization’s role in the prevention of elder abuse and neglect among constituencies and stakeholders groups. Equally critical is to increase understanding, appreciation, and support among all the key audiences, including legislators and potential funding sources, as well as to increase the audience’s ability to distinguish its programs from other organizations.

Branding or identity development is one of the most critical roles in the planning of strategic communications. The identity becomes the central and organizing element to all functions and disciplines of the communication efforts. Think of it as the glue that holds all program components together to provide consistency and purpose to all efforts.

Typically, the identity development phase of a communications plan is executed using a systematic approach. The first step is an audit to understand how programs are currently perceived internally and by constituents, stakeholders, and the public. The next step is to determine the program’s current image. This step usually includes a thorough review of how elder abuse and neglect programs are being communicated and by whom. From that information, the third step is to develop a compre-

hensive identity strategy that defines and clarifies the organization's mission, objectives and target audiences. The identity strategy also articulates a statement that describes the relationship with internal and external audiences.

Albeit important, branding is not just about logos, slogans, and consistent looks. Branding is about forming, shaping, and managing the relationship that the public has with an idea, in this case the prevention of elder abuse and neglect, so that the public and all constituents and stakeholders can understand, embrace, support, and advocate the cause.

The next issue facing the communication strategist is determining where and how to execute the program. This is a complicated decision that revolves largely around the budget, the target audience and the objectives that need to be accomplished. However, there are several reasons why an elder abuse and neglect prevention communication program should be executed with a national plan, rather than with isolated, disjointed local and regional efforts.

The first and obvious reason is cost. It is far more cost-effective and efficient to develop one plan for the whole country than a variety of local plans. Another reason is message consistency. Consistent, frequent messages, carefully crafted with the appropriate outcomes in mind, will impact the audience more effectively than inconsistent messages from sporadic local programs.

Just like any product or service that needs national awareness and distribution, the elder abuse and neglect cause is a national problem with similar issues to deal with all over the country. The effort should strive to execute a national communication program that unifies and strengthen the weight of the message from state and local community groups, teams, and coalitions.

The economies of scale of national communication programs include cost savings, centralization of communications planning, messaging, research, production, and distribution of creative (collateral, media planning, and buying). And, while a strategic communication program will take ample advantage of the economies of scale present in national campaigns, it is important to make absolutely clear that a plan of this scope will not be inexpensive.

Today, more than ever before, it takes money and resources to compete for attention in an over-communicated, commercial-message-saturated public. In fact, national advertising costs for packaged goods and other products, for instance, have increased steadily over the last decade. These are the realities that marketers face. These realities are also true for social marketing.

Finally, the last element to be considered in strategic communications is the ability to create and strengthen a relationship with any given target audience segment. "Relationship marketing" is typically technology-based to take advantage of the Internet's ability to build large consumer databases. Web-based applications provide a faster system to make contact with consumers. As a social marketing tool, the system typically is designed to build customer databases that can be segmented and analyzed, and can capture consumer information from different communications channels. With interactive technologies, the distribution of newsletters, research, and other pertinent information becomes very fast, efficient, and cost-effective.

In a well-integrated plan, the brand campaign delivers a message directly relevant to the consumer, while the interactive technology encourages consumer interaction that can be recorded and analyzed so the right materials, messages, and information can be delivered to the right audience.

### *CONCLUSION*

The aim of any communication effort, after all is said and done, is to generate awareness of any given issue or problem. Awareness creates interest, moves people to action, invites participation, and encourages people to advocate a cause or behavior.

There are no cookie-cutter approaches in strategic communications. Every product, every audience segment, every cause is unique. The fact that one strategy or mix of strategies worked for a social cause does not mean that it will work for elder abuse. Plans and objectives are developed based on a thorough review of all available information, exploratory research to uncover opportunities, a thorough understanding of the opportunities and problems uncovered by that research, and an in-depth awareness of the audience attitudes toward the issues. Audience insight is critical to any program success.

Elder abuse prevention efforts require input and involvement from the community. Awareness, education, and proactive prevention are the first steps we can take to address this issue.