

# Revival of Public Service Advertising Through Unconventional Mediums

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## Abstract

It is time advertising saved the world with innovation and creativity. People around the globe are now alarmed and are aware about the constant degradation of the environment and increase in other social problems. People across the globe are willing to put in their efforts for social and environmental causes. This change of attitude in consumers' approach has prompted advertisers and agencies to take a leap forward by helping consumers to contribute to a good cause in the most appropriate and interesting ways. By doing this, brands/organizations can rebuild strong connections and trust with the audience. Advertisers and NGOs today are very much familiar with the fact that the warning messages in TV commercials, hard-hitting headlines of daily adverts, and brilliantly made radio spots for public service messages can no longer lift up the spirits of the people. They also believe that nowadays, warning messages about social issues given by the conventional media can hardly get the desired response due to many reasons; therefore, the results are not pleasing. After observing the growing levels of social awareness and behavioral change in the present day consumers, advertisers have now decided to do something different on a social side to catch the attention of their consumers, and at the same time, do their bit for a good cause. Advertisers are now coming up with unconventional ways to make a difference and are also hiring renowned creative firms for their brands to do something innovative and productive for the present world. Hence, it is now up to brands and organizations to prove that they deserve to be trusted by the consumers, as it is high time for them to think about how they can add value to people's lives.

**Keywords :** public service advertising, pro bono, traditional or conventional advertising, unconventional advertising, social marketing

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The most reliable way to make sure you reach your audiences is to have an in-depth knowledge of the available routes. Today, our world is actually going through a lot of serious problems, and brands/organizations need to take the required measures towards sustainability and addressing the problems that plague our society. The efforts carried out by various brands and organizations to alert people about these social issues through the mass mediums – television, radio, newspapers, billboards did not get the required positive results. The main reason behind the same is the fact that these channels have become cluttered with time and now, people hardly give time to these overused and same old mediums. For instance, if we take television as a medium to convey a social message, then the majority of the people usually skip these messages or ads, mainly because they have hundreds of other options to switch to. Advertisers and NGOs soon realized the need for a change in the message conveying patterns. They understood the fact that audiences are no longer only interested in knowing the current problems or other social issues in interrupting ways. They not just want to listen, read or watch; they want to get involved and participate. They want to see the creative world showing them a way for a better future in innovative ways. "If brands want to play a genuine part in society, then they have to contribute to society" (David Droga, cited by Kolster in *Goodvertising : Creating Advertising That Cares*, 2012, p.136).

The changing mindset and attitude of people towards a better world has actually left the brands with the task of rebuilding their relationships with consumers, by regaining trust, and by making a real difference for people and the planet. Consumers want brands to play a bigger role in their lives. A global consumer research study called 'Brand Sustainable Futures' showed that an estimated 80% of the consumers expect corporations not only to take care of shareholders, but also play a significant part in solving the problems of the society ; from ensuring good jobs, making donations, and going beyond legal requirements to minimize pollution and other negative effects (Kolster, 2012). Thus, to assure their contribution towards a good cause, brands and organizations are now making tremendous efforts in many innovative ways to make a difference.

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## Background of the Study

Commercial advertising was started to market a product, and public service ads were started to change public interest by raising awareness about an issue affecting the world with a potentially rousing action. Soon, it became a capable tool of reaching out to and motivating large audiences.

“Advertising justifies its existence when used in the public interest – it is much too powerful a tool to use solely for commercial purpose.” Attributed to Howard Gossage by David Ogilvy (The Design Inspiration, n.d.).

According to Wikipedia (Wikipedia, Public Service Announcement, n.d.), public service advertising, non-commercial advertising, public interest advertising, cause marketing, and social marketing are different terms for the use of sophisticated advertising and marketing techniques (generally associated with commercial enterprises) on behalf of non-commercial, public interest issues and initiatives.

The first entity to use PSAs that more closely resemble modern messages was the U.S. Government. During the Civil War, the government sold bonds via newspaper advertisements provided without charge and placed throughout the North to raise money in support of the war. The device was so effective that the national bond sales have been credited with demonstrating “what advertising could do” and resulted in first national ad campaigns for baking powder, soap, and railroad travel, thus launching the commercial advertising industry. The first non-government ads that could be considered PSAs appeared after the turn of the century. In the early 1900s, ads were run free by newspapers in the U.S. to dramatize the outrages of child labor (Goodwill, n.d.).

On the other hand, in India as well, the Government initiated PSAs in earlier times. It was later that brands and NGOs started participating in spreading social messages. The most discussed and remembered Indian public service announcement from the history was being done at the time of Indira Gandhi, and it was an initiative taken by Sanjay Gandhi – ‘*Hum do Hamaare do*’. The slogan was created for the population control program in India. It was a huge success, and people still remember it. There were many other PSAs that have been done before the ‘*Hum do hamaare do*’ initiative, but this was the most popular one. Another known example of PSA in Indian advertising is the ‘Pulse Polio’ program. It was also an initiative by the Indian Government to spread awareness about Polio among the people of the country. It was also a huge success as a celebrity was used for the purpose. Presently, Mr. Amitabh Bachchan is the brand ambassador for the Pulse Polio initiative.

Out of all communication mediums, television has always remained on the top if we talk about public service advertising, and the reason is its reach. Even these days, there are a lot of PSAs that are running on radio and on television, but the effect of these advertisements is not the same as it was earlier. The world is changing on a faster pace and so are the people. They are becoming ad-literate. Research studies have shown that people are no longer devoting time on these traditional mediums, and technology is making them more advanced, and is providing them with a bunch full of other alternatives. For this reason, various brands and NGOs -in collaboration or independently - have now started doing groundbreaking stuff by exploring new and interesting ways to reach out to their audiences for contributing in a meaningful manner for social causes.

## Research Question for the Present Study

**RQ: Why the way humans consume media is transforming and where is it heading?**

## Aims and Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of undertaking this research was to bring out various tools used by brands and NGOs in the present day for the communication of public service messages. The main aims and objectives of the present study are as follows :

- 1) To study (with examples) brands and organizations that are changing their communication strategy - from conventional mode of communication to unconventional mediums.
- 2) Comparing the impact created by unconventional methods over conventional ones for public service advertising and to examine which has provided a much powerful response.
- 3) To observe and analyze the various ways in which unconventional mediums have been used so far - in terms of locations, tools, language, and the reaction of audience.
- 4) To encourage other agencies, organizations, brands, NGOs, up-and-coming professionals, as well as students to

adopt these innovative and effective techniques over conventional methods in future ventures.

5) To identify useful unconventional mediums for many social problems.

## Methodology

The research study is exploratory in nature. New techniques and tools of communication were observed and have been revealed through this research to find out the impact of unconventional methods over conventional methods for public service advertising in the present scenario. The changing scenario of advertising as a medium and the behavioural patterns of audience have encouraged all brands, organizations, NGOs, and other authorities to move ahead with better and innovative ways of communication. Case studies of various brands/organizations were considered and were carefully analyzed to find out the impact of unconventional media on public service advertising. The study has revealed that the unconventional ways are now way ahead of conventional mediums in terms of recall ability, message recall value, direct interactivity, and clear communication. The identification of constraints in the usage of conventional mediums has helped various brands to think ahead and take up unconventional ways of advertising to receive a positive response from the consumers.

## Hypotheses

↳ **H1: Unconventional communication channels are more effective and innovative than the conventional channels to convey public service messages.**

↳ **H2: Unconventional mediums have a greater impact on the audiences' mind than the conventional mediums.**

## Reasons Supporting the Effectiveness of Unconventional Mediums

Over the last few years, there have been extreme advancements in technology, which has resulted in changing the behavioural pattern of the audience. Till now, there were some set communication channels to convey a message – television, radio, magazines, newspapers, and billboards. Each and every brand and organization was using the same channels to reach out to the same target audience at the same time. The reasons are diverse and include the rise of ad skipping technology, the interruptive nature of conventional advertising, and an increasingly ad-literate audience. Due to this reason, advertisers and many other brands/organizations started opting for unconventional ways to reach out to their audience. Major unconventional ways for winning over conventional mediums to spread social messages are: Contagious, Collaborative, Innovative, and Compassion.

**1) Contagious:** The most incredible thing about unconventional mediums is that they are contagious. If it is done in an appropriate manner, it spreads like a wildfire. It is much more capable than any of the traditional mediums, as it carries the power and source to interact with audience instantly. The Internet has played an important role in making it infectious among the audience. They can go to your idea, see it, feel it, like it, and the most importantly, share it. In today's globally connected world, the effects can be immediate and overwhelming. Brands can see their audiences' count turning from one to millions. What is needed is a great idea with a transmittable element in it. Some of the unconventional cases that have brought a tremendous response from the audience in the past are as follows :

As depicted in the Exhibit 1, the National Council of Social Services in Brazil ran the world's biggest hug in October 2010 using the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro. Over two nights, the statue's spotlights were turned off, allowing projections and 3D imagery to create the illusion that Christ was closing his arms around the city. The symbolic 3D hugs were linked to the number of visitors to the campaign site, raising public awareness about sexual abuse of children and teenagers, and encouraging the development of healthy relationships based on trust. The idea was powerful and the results were remarkable, and through the Internet, the message was shared with millions of viewers, and made this campaign a huge success (I Believe in Adv, 2011).

As depicted in the Exhibit 2, *Nanhi Kali*, A Girl Story was an initiative taken up by Mahindra Foundation for underprivileged girls in India. In India, there are thousands of girls who never get an education; instead they experience gender discrimination, forced labor, with many girls also facing early marriage, sexual abuse, and slavery. StrawberryFrog, New York made these interactive videos - the world's first donation film series based on Tarla's life. Tarla's story will progress only by audience donations unlocking new chapters. Just like Tarla, each girl at Project

### Exhibit 1. The World's Biggest Hug



Source : Adapted from I Believe in Adv (2013). *The World's Biggest Hug* (Conselho Nacional Do Sesi) [video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.ibelieveinadv.com/2011/07/conselho-nacional-do-sesi-the-worlds-biggest-hug/>

### Exhibit 2. Nanhi Kali, A Girl Story



Source : Adapted from Littleredrobots (2012, April 27). "A girl story" case study [video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VagaovmcV5c>

Nanhi Kali depends on donors to progress, stay in school, and complete her education (A Girl Story FAQ, n.d.) . Through the innovative use of YouTube, the stories were told with Tarla moving from one level to another. This campaign was a success, as the story was told so personally, and donations from the audiences were needed in order to move forward. Hence, the viewers felt that they were really making a difference in a young girl's life, and were helping to shape her future. Donating to a charity always makes a difference, but seeing it like this made it much more effective.

Exhibit 3 depicts a blind car . New Delhi has witnessed a huge rise in drunk-driving accidents in the last few years.

### Exhibit 3. Don't Drink and Drive : The Blind Car



Source: Adapted from Zacharoff, M. (2013). *Blind car*. Retrieved from <http://weloveviral.blogspot.in/2011/06/dont-drink-and-drive-blind-car.html>

In 2010 alone, around 9,000 such accidents took place in the city. Over 2100 of these were fatal. Hard Rock Café with McCann Worldgroup, New Delhi decided to do an outdoor stunt - to convey the dangers of drunk driving in an impactful manner - by using the same medium through which drunk drivers commit the offence – a moving car. A car fully covered with a typical car cover with “drunk driving is as dangerous” printed on both the sides was driven across the busy roads of Delhi for a week. The blind car created quite a buzz around the places it was seen. It was widely written about in newspapers, magazines, and online blogs. Various NGOs, Delhi Police, and student bodies pledged their support to the cause and the campaign got a massive word-of-mouth publicity (Spikes Asia, 2011).

**2) Collaborative:** Collaboration is rewarding in itself; it brings people closer. If brands spread messages to the audience about some serious issues and need a response or support from them, then collaboration is a must. It makes communication a two-way process, and it also helps brands to interact with their audience directly and ask for their support. Consumers also feel good that due to the brands, they are also (directly or indirectly) contributing for a good cause, and at the same time, this also helps the brands and NGOs to move closer to their audience. Collaboration has the power of unity in it. It shows people that together, we can surely make a difference.

As depicted in the Exhibit 4, Levi's 'Care Tag for Our Planet' is an innovative and wide spread initiative taken up by the garment company in association with Goodwill Industries. Levi's introduced the 'Care Tag for Our Planet' tag after realizing that nearly 23.8 billion pounds of clothing go into US landfills each year. According to a press release by Levi Strauss & Co (Press Release, 2010):

'Care Tag for Our Planet' is the first partnership of its kind to encourage donation as a way to extend the life cycle of clothing and textiles and reduce the environmental impact of caring for clothing (para 4). Donating to Goodwill not only diverts unwanted items from landfills but also helps people who need it most in local communities. Donations of gently used clothing and other items are sold in Goodwill stores, where the revenues help fund job training programs, employment placement services and other community-based programs for people with disabilities, those who lack education or job experience, and those facing other challenges to finding employment (para 2). According to Jim Gibbons, President and CEO of Goodwill Industries International, 166 local, independent Goodwill agencies in the United States and Canada use the donations to create job training services that help more than 1.5 million people (para 3).

By undertaking such an initiative, and by getting their consumers involved, Levi's made the consumer feel like they were part of the solution, and not the problem. This is the main reason as to why collaboration is quite efficient and gives the people a chance to be a part of the initiative and bring in a positive change. Levi's inspired people to donate



**Exhibit 4. Levi's Care Tag**

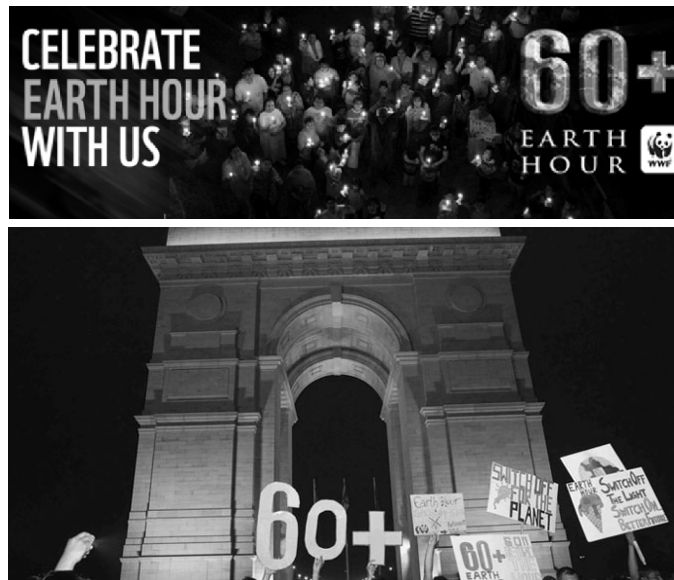


Source: Adapted from Ads of the World (2013). *Levi Strauss: Care tag for our planet*. Retrieved from [http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/levi\\_strauss\\_care\\_tag\\_for\\_our\\_planet](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/levi_strauss_care_tag_for_our_planet)

and made the consumer feel that they were a part of the brand in reinforcing positive results. This idea was a massive success globally.

Earth Hour (Exhibit 5) is a worldwide event organized by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and is held towards the end of March annually (on a Saturday), encouraging households and businesses to turn off their non-essential lights for one hour to raise awareness about the need to take action on climate change (Wikipedia, Earth Hour, n.d.). Earth Hour began as a Sydney - only event in 2007. Hundreds of world landmarks from Berlin's Brandenburg Gate to India Gate in New Delhi went dark on Saturday as part of a global effort to highlight climate change. "Let us stand together to make of our world a sustainable source for our future as humanity on this planet," the Nelson Mandela

**Exhibit 5. Turn Out the Lights, It's Earth Hour**



Source: Adapted from Good to be Green (2010, March 27). *Turn out the lights, it's earth hour!* [video file]. Retrieved from <http://g2bgreen.com/category/earth-hour>

**Exhibit 6. The World's First Solar Power Billboard**



Source : Adapted from This is not ADVERTISING (2011, November 24). *Solar power billboard*. Retrieved from <http://thisisnotadvertising.wordpress.com/tag/network-bbdo>

Centre of Memory said in a tweet (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2012). Global environmental groups showed a way to people, and due to this collaboration, millions of people in as many as 7001 cities and towns in 153 countries and territories across the world participated in Earth Hour, 2013 (Earth Hour 60+, n.d.).

**3) Innovative:** Innovation is the core of advertising; it makes one look distinctive from the other. In this fast moving world, where every brand and organization is struggling to survive, it is innovation only that gives them the power to stand strong and different from others and become visible. To convey social messages in today's world, traditional mediums are not enough. Now, innovation is not only needed in the message, but also in the medium. The way of showing or putting across that same message differently makes it work.

Generally, billboards are viewed as a visual pollution. Net#Work BBDO created a billboard for NedBank by attaching solar panels to the billboard. The billboard was able to supply energy to a school that feeds more than 1100 kids in one of South Africa's poorest townships (Exhibit 6). This socially aware approach to outdoor advertising not only changed the public perception of billboards, but also built the brand personality of Nedbank, which through social upliftment projects is seen as a bank that cares about more than just money. Also, their payoff line, "Make Things Happen" was elevated from mere words into a tangible demonstration (This is not ADVERTISING, 2011).

Puma, with the support of Fuseproject, France, launched the 'Clever Little Bag' (Exhibit 7) in April 2010. According to Fuseproject (n.d.):

The challenge was to look at one of the most difficult and stagnant issues facing the retail industry in regards to sustainability and environmental harm: Packaging, and more specifically, shoeboxes. Boxes contribute to millions of tons of waste a year and even with proposed second uses, they are eventually thrown out (para 2).....The bag is clever because it uses 65% less cardboard than traditional shoeboxes, has no laminated printing or tissue paper, weighs less in shipping, and replaces the plastic retail bag (para 4).... For Puma, the 'Clever Little Bag' is a pivotal phase of it's sustainability program. The tens of millions of shoes shipped in our bag will reduce water, energy and diesel consumption on the manufacturing level alone by more than 60% per year. In other words : Approximately 8,500 tons less paper consumed, 20 million Mega joules of electricity saved, 1 million liters less fuel oil used and 1 million liters of water conserved. During transport 500,000 liters of

**Exhibit 7. Clever Little Bag by Puma**



Source: Adapted from Fuse Project (n.d.).  
*Clever little bag by Puma*. Retrieved from  
<http://www.fuseproject.com/products-47>.

**Exhibit 8. Supermarket Posters by UNICEF**



Source : Adapted from Dr Prem's Marketing Guide & Blog (n.d.). *UNICEF: The children of Kashmir are freezing*. Retrieved from  
<http://www.adpunch.org/unicef-the-children-of-kashmir-are-freezing.html>

diesel is saved and lastly, by replacing traditional shopping bags, the difference in weight will save almost 275 tons of plastic. (para 7).

It is clear from the above mentioned description that choosing bags rather than boxes reduces carbon emissions, saves electricity, fuel, and water. It is something that the world would love to use. It is an innovation that raises the brand's popularity, while still being kind to the environment.

**4) Compassion:** A face-off with a real life situation makes you feel empathetic about someone or something. When it comes to social service messages, compassion surely has a long lasting impact on the viewer's mind. Compassion shows them a real story in an actually created sight and gives a moment and environment to realize the suffering of the bearer. It surely does a lot to convey the message on the social front.

Two years after the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, many of the victims, including many children, were homeless and were exposed to the bitterly cold weather conditions (temperatures in Kashmir are as low as minus 13 in the highland villages where many earthquake victims live). UNICEF decided to place posters of children from Kashmir in freezer compartments in supermarkets (Exhibit 8). The message on the poster was "The children of Kashmir are freezing". This way, shoppers who were contentedly going about their daily lives, buying frozen foods, and living in an area with a high standard of living, were faced with the harsh reality of Kashmiri life. The striking reminder tugged on consumers' heartstrings and encouraged them to donate to UNICEF (Ad Age, 2007).

Exhibit 9 depicts a disabled person distributing flyers in an attempt to convince people to fasten their seatbelts. Carabineros de Chile (the advertiser), for their seatbelt campaign, hired disabled people to put forward some persuasive approach. Those disabled people approached car drivers who were not wearing their seatbelts with flyers saying: 'I didn't buckle my seatbelt either'. The results were outstanding as 9 out of 10 drivers who received the flyer fastened their seatbelts immediately. With this campaign, the advertiser was able to get more than 400,000 drivers to fasten their seatbelts (Cassis, 2011).

## Discussion

This is certainly a time when a message needs a different medium to come in proximity with its audience. The



**Exhibit 9. Flyers Distributed by Disabled People as part of Carabineros de Chile's Seatbelt Campaign**



Source : Adapted from Cassis, F.P. (2011, December 19). *Just buckle it*. Retrieved from <http://www.behance.net/gallery/Carabineros-de-Chile-Seatbelt->

examples discussed in the previous section have clearly depicted that different mediums can also bring out the desired results from people. Unconventional ways are community-empowering and planet-saving. As stated by H1, unconventional communication channels are more effective and innovative than the conventional channels to convey public service messages. The examples presented in this paper provide ample evidence in support of hypothesis 1 (H1). Hence, H1 is accepted. Next, H2 states that unconventional mediums have a lasting impact on the consumers' mind than conventional mediums. This is certainly true because in traditional mediums, audiences are just spoon-fed, and there is no such interaction between the brand/organization and the audience, but when unconventional ways are used, there is a lot of interaction between the brand/organization and the audience, as the audience is an active part of the activity, and this increases the recall value of a brand.

## Conclusion

In the present competitive world, consumers have a lot more options to switch to than they had in the past. Leaders of agencies, businesses, governments, NGOs, and people around the world can call for a movement of change with the ultimate goal of finding serious and effective solutions for a sustainable future, in which not wealth, but well-being would define success. The examples and methods adopted by brands so far have convinced many other bigger brands and organizations to think different.

Unlike all conventional advertising mediums, unconventional mediums are not limited. There is always scope of doing something new in unconventional mediums. In earlier times, advertising used to be considered as complete if it was used for television or newspapers, but with incomparable growth and competition in the present market, unconventional mediums have come in as a savior. There is a lot of scope for further research on this topic, as this is just the starting, and brands have just started exploring countless unconventional mediums. The present study has shown clearly that unconventional mediums are not restricted to one particular brand or to any one particular segment. We can use as many ways as we want for any number of brands, and only unconventional mediums have made this possible for the present advertising scenario.

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