

# Local Anti-Violence Media Products and Design Decisions

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## **Introduction**

Media campaigns have been used to target behavioral changes such as reduction in drug use and trafficking, environmental causes, reduction in cigarette smoking, and addressing physical and psychological abuse. The Center for Public Safety Initiatives (CPSI) conducted an analysis of media produced by local organizations devoted to reducing youth gun and retaliatory violence within the City of Rochester. The success of any media campaign is based on the successful dispersion, absorption, and application of a message, which further depends on the validity of that message to the intended target audience. As such, CPSI is examining aspects of media campaigns targeting high-risk, violence-involved youth, ranging in age from approximately 14 to 28 years of age. This paper is part of a series meant to develop knowledge about what such a campaign should include and how it should be carried out in preparation for creating a media campaign for Project Safe Neighborhoods, a multi-agency effort to intervene in retaliatory gun disputes and prevent gun violence. The goal of the campaign will be to discourage retaliatory violence and specifically the use of guns.

Media campaigns are not perpetually ongoing. These campaigns run for a limited amount of time, based usually on funding. Considering this factor, it is important we understand what mediums play a meaningful role in behavioral change and how we should execute these messages. The question of whether or not these efforts have the intended effects on consumers' behavior is also important. We attempted to identify in our interviews how campaigns have been evaluated for effectiveness, what was specifically found to be effective, and how our future campaigns may be evaluated. We found several important directions for the development of an anti-gun-violence media campaign:

- Focus on the very small target audiences with credible messages of hope and realistic alternatives to the use of gun violence.
- Use person-to person distribution methods and convey messages through urban culture.
- Pamphlets and cards are effective, as are items that can be used every day such as clothing or jewelry.

- An effective campaign would ideally function at several levels, including individuals actually involved in gun violence, those who know individuals involved with gun violence, and the wider community.
- Focus groups and impact assessments are the most direct ways to measure media efficacy, though other measures should be developed.

The paper below provides more detailed information on each of these points.

### **Better Understanding the Target Audience**

To gain an understanding of our target audience (youths who are at high risk of shooting or being the victim of a shooting), we employed the help of several organizations in the Rochester area. Some of these groups engage the topic of youth gun violence directly, and others are working towards goals that are indirectly related, such as community involvement and improvement, educational advancement, employment, housing, and poverty. Each of these organizations is responsible for media products that are distributed to a respective audience across many mediums including print, interactive (i.e. online), radio, television, and video. When we refer to “media products,” we mean any materials developed and/or distributed by an organization to convey a message. This can range from a concerted, multi-medium effort at a particular behavior change to a simple advertising of a program’s services.

### **Interviewed Non-Profit Organizations**

CPSI asked members of various organizations for a meeting for the purpose of viewing and taking inventory of past, current, and future media initiatives. Each interviewee was asked a series of questions relating to their reasons for and decisions that drive their media products. This includes the types of mediums, the viability of those mediums to their target audience, and the design decisions that shape the look and tone of each media product. The organizations interviewed included Action for a

Better Community's Save Our Youth, Pathways to Peace, Teen Empowerment, Project Exile, The Gandhi Institute, a media representative of Chicago Cure Violence, and several professors in the School of Design at Rochester Institute of Technology.

In most cases, the quality in production of media products is based on budget. Some examples looked very professional, while others looked handmade. We were able to determine several mediums that are commonly used by the interviewed agencies to reach an audience. These mediums include printed (e.g. pamphlets, posters, and billboards), video, television, radio, interactive mediums (such as websites and social media), and usable products (e.g. mugs, t-shirts, hats, and jewelry). While inventorying each product, we noticed a wide range of imagery, type choices, color choices, and messaging. Some messages employed a method of deterrence or scare tactics, while others chose to illustrate uplifting and hopeful messages.

It is important to understand the groups interviewed have related but different goals and audiences. As such, their approach to their respective foci differs. For outreach workers that are dealing with the target audience face-to-face, it is important to not appear to have an allegiance with any one gang or group (SOY, personal communication, Feb. 3, 2015). This excludes, in some cases, color combinations that reflect known gangs. Save Our Youth (SOY) is one such outreach organization using the Chicago Cure Violence model. They feel that using violent or intimidating images, depictions of blood, and images of guns or associated paraphernalia can have negative effects, partially because this audience is steeped in a masculine identity. This audience believes that showing any weakness is a strike against one's manhood, therefore scaring this group is less likely to be successful. Nonetheless, the audience has an affinity for some relatively violent motifs, and creating media that reflects this reality may garner the target audience's attention.

The media products from SOY were made very inexpensively and quickly. Most graphics were developed in-house or developed pro-bono by local graphic designers. As is the case with many not-for-profit organizations, there is not a large budget devoted to the design of media campaigns. The result of this is a group of media products that do not follow any system relation. In other words, beyond their

name and logo, their products are somewhat inconsistent (i.e. little coordination of colors and format across products).

Representatives of Save Our Youth also pointed out that messages about non-violence are more readily received by individuals in high-risk situations if they find that person truly credible and able to help. This requires trust built over time with consistency, respect, and love, and it can be difficult to achieve through a media campaign alone. This insight highlights the importance of having community members be involved in the development and dispersion of the campaign's messages (SOY, personal communication, Feb. 3, 2015).

Under the leadership of the Camp Good Days/ Partners Against Violence Everywhere (PAVE) initiative, Project Exile is a gun violence reduction program directed toward removing illegal firearms from the civilian population. Project Exile's secondary initiative is to bring about awareness that being caught with an illegal firearm carries great consequences, including mandatory incarceration. Project Exile is based on a program of the same name from Richmond, Virginia. Its methods include a broad media and public outreach effort to educate people about the penalties of using illegal firearms. Since 1998, according to the Department of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), Project Exile claims responsibility for removing over 15,000 guns from the civilian community; however this method involved much more than a simple media campaign. Considering that gun buy-back programs are aimed at private gun owners, there is little data, if any, that suggests a reduction in criminally-owned firearms. Moreover, a reduction in the number of firearms does not necessarily correspond to a reduction in homicides (Project Exile, personal communication, 2015).

This representative stated that they are not looking for shock or scare tactics in the creation of their media products. They look for images, slogans, and messages that convey truth and, in some cases, are meant to scare the audience only with the reality of the message. Rochester's Project Exile has produced some media products in-house as well as with the help of a local design firm. There were no taboo colors or images that they spoke of. The director of the organization was responsible for

conceptualizing and producing most media products. The PAVE website looks relatively professional but does not employ a consistent set of design elements that are reflective of their cause. This site displays the statistics of cases tried under the Project Exile program. These statistics include the number of cases tried and the years of incarceration resulting from these trials. This information is a positive effort to show the policies of the program in action, but, again, these numbers do not necessarily reflect a decrease in shooting and homicides (see Pratt, n.d. and Wogan, 2013 for review of similar programs).

The M.K. Gandhi Institute for Non-Violence takes a different approach. It is important to stress that this non-profit group focuses on a broader topic of non-violence. Unlike Save Our Youth, messages are directed at the community at-large and for all types of violence. This group had many different types of media products that we were able to review. It was apparent that the messages are of a hopeful and peaceful nature. It was also apparent that the Gandhi Institute had professional assistance in developing media components and campaigns. Recently, they received a grant to develop a media campaign around non-violence and worked for two years with the Ad Council and other designers to implement it. Their work paid special attention to colors, type choices, imagery, message, and cohesiveness. Since the grant ended in 2013, they have continued to use many of the design choices developed during the campaign, created well-managed and continuous messaging. As with most other partner groups we spoke with, allocating an already small budget, affects the type of and frequency of media products directed to any particular cause.

When asked specific questions referring to color, type, and image choices, the responses reflected some attention to this on part of the Gandhi Institute campaign designers. Color decisions are made to bring attention to the products, yet their palettes were muted to offer a warm, calming, and inviting aesthetic. There were several examples of black and white images as well. There was attention paid to using a consistent color palette, even in painting the Institute's

house in the same red color used on media products. Classic serif typefaces and thin curvilinear serif faces were used throughout their documents. These have an organic, yet clear and legible appearance (Gandhi Institute, personal communication, 2015). Similarly to other groups interviewed, there was insufficient data available to support any design decisions, nor was there data that supported the success of any one initiative. The program could only provide quantitative data as to the location, type, and costs of the media campaign and anecdotal or qualitative evidence that supported why they made particular decisions and about the campaign's effects.

The Gandhi Institute representatives brought our attention to several other themes as well. They felt it was important to run a campaign that touched a broad audience, as violence affects everyone, and it may be ultimately detrimental to segment certain communities with targeted campaigning. Messages may have to be tailored for different purposes, but broad campaigning was important for uniting broad community support against violence. They also felt that distributing items at events or having people participate in the creation of media items provides a sense of ownership and identity with the item. This was particularly true of items that could be "useful" in one's everyday life, such as shirts, hats, jewelry, mugs, magnets, and pins. They felt this was an effective and inexpensive way to get people to redistribute the message over time. Having people involved in the creation of the media products also promotes a sense of pride and ownership in the item as well as the message.

### **Rochester Institute of Technology School of Design**

Accessing the staff of design professors at Rochester Institute of Technology offered additional insight at the creative level. CPSI is interested in design elements that can influence an audience through color, type, message, and image choices. CPSI spoke with four professors that differ in age and background to gather multiple views. All four of these professors have

experience creating media products for various social causes. Some examples of these campaigns addressed voter education, smoking awareness, opposition to the development of green spaces, sustainability promotion (such as waste management and public health), LGBT awareness, and the promotion of music programs in local schools.

In only a very few cases was there data to support the success of these campaigns. In the case of the anti-smoking media campaign, an impact assessment was conducted to gather data, but the results of the assessment were not available for review (RIT-CIAS, personal communication 2/26/2015). In the example of local opposition to the development of green space, the success of the campaign was measured in support for the cause that ultimately ended in a vetoing of the development proposal (RIT-CIAS, personal communication, 2/26/2015). Aside from those particular instances, there was no data of any kind to measure the success of the campaigns or any systematic design decisions that were made.

Regardless of this lack of empirical data, each professor had different responses to our series of questions. Some related their knowledge to CPSI's initiative, and others provided a general analysis of the design fundamentals. In each case, the interviewee stressed the value of tangible materials that could be consumed and re-consumed repeatedly. More importantly, there is a relationship that should be established with the audience during the media consumption process that adds credibility to the campaign and value to the media product. The design professionals' insights are grouped by themes below.

### **Colors**

Colors have a subconscious effect on the viewer. It is well known that certain colors signal certain emotions. For example, warm colors, like red, can be associated with aggression or abrupt change. Conversely, cool colors, like blues and greens, are more calming. A suggestion was made to look at the

interiors of prisons. The use of color in a correctional facility is a good example of a passive approach to affecting an individual's psyche (RIT-CIAS, personal communication, 2/26/2015). The colors most commonly used in correctional facilities are white, gray, and pastel shades of blue, green, and orange. These are softer muted versions of a more saturated parent color. There were some opposing opinions as well. The use of a darker color palette to reflect the seriousness of the message was suggested multiple times. It was also suggested that the color palette should reflect common themes observed in pop-culture that is associated with our target audience. In the case of the Rochester Project Safe Neighborhoods retaliatory gun dispute campaign, the audience consists of individuals between the ages of 14 and 28 with a high risk of shooting someone or being shot themselves. This group strongly associates with the hip-hop and professional athletics communities. Color choices associated with these entertainment outlets are very colorful and bold, as can be observed in graffiti, wall murals, album covers, and sports memorabilia.

### **Type**

Here again there is some separation in views concerning type or font choices. It is apparent from the media examples CPSI has taken inventory of that most type choices are not necessarily well planned. This is evident by observing the multitude of choices made and the lack of consistency across many media products with the same or similar messages. One school of thought is that the use of typography should be clean, legible, and clearly displayed. This is a fundamental practice of graphic design. Graphic design is a form of visual communication. The utility of any graphic design work is the most important factor of its success. These design fundamentals, however, do not consider any particular audience. They only suggest how to communicate through text and imagery at the most general level.

Another suggestion came in the form of using a blackletter (gothic) typeface commonly seen in gang tags and associated tattooing. While this is recognizable and accepted among this audience, its association with gang imagery may cast a negative light on this type of imagery. It is important not to inadvertently glorify the topic of youth and gang violence while still attracting the target audience's attention.

### **Imagery and Message**

Again, two different paths of advisement emerged during interviews with the design professors at RIT with regards to imagery and messaging. The first suggestion was to follow the “rules” of graphic design. That is to say, that type, image, and message should be clearly defined, aligned rationally, and convey neutrality. Following these practices results in clean and clear messaging that can be interpreted visually. Those with opposing views feel that creating a clean professional look and feel identifies the origin of the media product as coming from a position of authority or, at the very least, coming from an outside source, thereby risking having reduced credibility with our target audience. More so, there is less likelihood that this group will absorb a message that does not appear genuine.

It was suggested there might be more success in a more progressive approach. The use of familiar urban imagery and type choices would present a message stemming from peer and community groups rather than from a position of authority. Suggestions included the use of pop-culture images reflecting music, professional sports, graffiti, and other forms of urban public art. Using colors and type choices that are familiar to our target group, without the aggressive nature that gang tags and graffiti, can illustrate a hopeful and uplifting message while reflecting the audience’s daily life. It was also suggested that we approach images and messages that convey love and consistency. These are factors that may be missing in the lives of young inner city impoverished individuals. In addition to love and consistency, the message of choice is important. Illustrating and placing value on alternatives to street life will motivate individuals who are seeking an alternative to using gun violence. With the addition of positive community images, such as, churches, recreational centers, and community functions, we can construct a powerful image of hope and change.

### **Summary**

Our preliminary conclusions indicate that creating a behavior-change media campaign to address retaliatory gun-involved disputes must involve non-traditional mediums and dispersion tactics in order to reach the very small number of individuals who are likely to be involved in

gun-related disputes. Typical mass-media outlets such as television and radio may be effective for raising awareness of gun violence among the general community, but it is not likely to be cost-effective at bringing about behavior change within our target population. A campaign should also aim to reach those people who directly know violence-involved individuals, as they can provide resources and referrals to those at direct risk.

Those we interviewed felt that the target audience would be best reached with honest messages of alternatives to gun violence and hope, and such messages would be enhanced if the person receiving the message felt a personal connection and sense of credibility with the person or agency delivering the message. In past campaigns, printed media such as pamphlets and information cards were the most common and cost-effective means of relaying a message, and “useful” items that conveyed the message of non-violence were also very popular, such as t-shirts, mugs, magnets, hats, and jewelry. Integration with pop culture was also believed to be very important, especially in terms of music, targeted radio spots, and the use of social media (especially videos).

It is important to note that the Project Safe Neighborhoods media campaign specifically aims to reduce the use of guns to resolve conflicts, especially of a retaliatory nature. The campaign is not meant to change high-risk individuals’ entire lives (such as desisting entirely from gangs), but it rather focuses on the immediate decision to use guns. This targeted message reflects the reality of high-risk individuals who may not be able to fully disengage from a street life but who may be able to choose not to use guns.

Besides the broad-focus Gandhi Institute non-violence campaign several years ago, Rochester has seen very little coordinated effort in messaging to discourage the use of retaliatory gun violence. However, developing such a targeted, effective, and sustainable campaign poses many obstacles, not the least of which being that a message must be accompanied by services that provides actual alternatives to gun violence. Measuring the effect of media campaign poses additional challenges, with only focus groups and impact assessments being suggested as

methods for measuring effect. Some of the tactics mentioned above may help in the development of an effective campaign.

Overall, there is very little data measuring success or effect of media campaigns alone. There are varying ideas pertaining to what messages we should be promoting and how we should promote them. Currently there are a large number of media products that employ a scare or intimidation tactic. Some of the products that CPSI reviewed fell somewhere between this type of message and a slightly less aggressive message of “truth.” The “truth” message informs high-risk violence-involved youths about the ramifications of violence. The value of this type of messaging can be undermined, as it has been observed that intimidation can have an adverse effect on youths already involved in violence and high-risk situations. Credibility of the message that conveys truth and positive imagery is paramount to the absorption of the information. Images, type, and colors that this group identifies with have the best chance to encourage viewing the media product and to drive a positive outcome.

#### **References:**

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