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WWF: Public Service Announcement

Public service announcements are a form of advertising that aim to disseminate an argument or create awareness to a particular audience. They play on the emotions, attitudes and interests of their audience, in similar ways that advertisers promote their products. World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) created a disturbing PSA that not only plays on emotions and attitudes, but also targets much bigger issues within patriotism, consumerism and global awareness. This essay will analyze the PSA, relating to topics covered by Twitchell, Dickinson and Williams. It will establish the effectiveness of the methods used in the PSA to deliver the desired message to its audience.

The WWF public service announcement uses a powerful image of multiple planes directed at the World Trade Centers. It then shows a small WWF symbol in the top corner with printed text saying, “The tsunami killed 100 times more people than 9/11, the planet is brutally powerful. Respect it. Preserve it.” WWF is referring back to the 2004 tsunami that took place in the Indian Ocean, affecting Indonesia, India, Thailand, Maldives and Somalia with a death toll around 283,0001. Originally aired in Brazil, there was a lot of controversy over the representation and dissemination of incorrect messages.

Without the symbol in the corner, it would be almost impossible to guess which organization this PSA belongs to. It could pass for an anti-terrorist, military or National Guard PSA, but it seems less likely as an environmental organization. The message is obvious after the text is read: there are bigger disasters killing more people. However,
this seems like a very dramatic and offensive approach in light of what happened September 11th. One of the methods they are using to reach their desired message is to compare the death tolls of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the attack on the world trade center. This comparison is unnecessary, since they are not comparing the same types of devastations. The tsunami was a natural disaster, and although it is equally as tragic, and the death toll was much higher, September 11th was a terrorist attack on various areas of the United States. It makes the organization seem insensitive to the number of deaths resulting from September 11th alone. Saying “the tsunami killed 100 times more people” sends the message that the 3,000 deaths were not as important.

The target audience for the WWF tends to range between 25-50 year olds, worldwide, with special interests in preserving the environment and saving endangered wildlife. They typically take on projects surrounding climate change, conservation and protecting endangered species, making this PSA completely different from their usual strategy. This advertisement seems to be aiming at a much wider, more diverse audience. In this regard, they used a picture of the terrorist attack known worldwide so the global community would see the comparison and ultimately accept their argument.

There are numerous issues with this controversial PSA. First of all, without the WWF symbol in the corner, it would be extremely hard to guess which organization put out this PSA. It does not relate to their normal projects, does not fit on their multitude of platforms and seems more like a military or terrorist advertisement. This is concerning because right from the beginning the general public would be confused as to the intended message. The organization is not creating awareness as much as they are creating the perception that natural disasters can be more detrimental than human attacks. Second, as
audiences are conscious of their position as the audience or consumer, the WWF has attempted to separate identification between themselves and America. Either they are American and patriotic, or they are not American, sympathetic to the situation but see larger world issues. They have tried to separate American from the rest of the world. And Finally, they are selling an opinion and whether correct or not, they invalidate all the deaths of those who died in the terrorist attack.

It is possible to analyze the effectiveness of this public service announcement through three ideologies on advertising: Twitchell and the importance of storytelling or branding, Williams and modern advertising and Dickinson and consumer culture resulting from September 11\textsuperscript{th}.

In the article \textit{An English Teacher Looks at Branding}, James Twitchell notes the importance of branding and creating a myth or story for the advertising of products (Twitchell, 230). This can be directly applied to the WWF PSA. WWF hopes to create some kind of story with the image they are showing. By giving a visualization of the amount of planes it would take to kill as many people on September 11\textsuperscript{th} as the Indian Ocean Tsunami did in 2004, they are creating a story to back up their position. WWF clearly feels as if natural disasters can take more lives than human disasters, and by giving a visualization of this, they hope to show the rest of the world this position as well. Twitchell states that “stories get attached to manufactured things”, meaning advertisers set out to create a message, and the message is received by its intended audience as a story. In this case, the story is getting attached to this PSA not manufactured goods. It is evident that this PSA creates emotion, uses powerful images, enhanced by computers to
deliver a set of beliefs. Therefore, WWF is selling their idea and position on natural
disasters through emotions and guilt people would associate with when seeing this PSA.

Next, Raymond Williams’ position on advertising in Advertising: A Magic System
shows a development in advertising that can be used in public service announcements as
well. Williams States “Ads, therefore, frequently say that buying the material product
(the brand) will solve non-material problems” (Williams, 13). In relation to the WWF
PSA, WWF is saying by donating or buying into the message can solve non-material
problems, personal and global. The non-material, personal problems could be following
trends for peer acceptance, donating for inclusion in an organization or for self-morale.
Non-material global problems would include wanting to make environmental change,
contributing to climate control or even as misinformed as relating this to anti-terrorism.
This sense of advertisements as a form of “magic” to make change or promote change is
actually promoting a consumer culture or capitalist approach to making a difference
(Williams, 13). It gives consumers the chance to choose from different organizations, as
opposed to the brands Williams talks about, and encourages participation in this system.

To take this idea of consumerism even further, Greg Dickinson discusses changes
in consumer buying behaviour in the article Selling Democracy: Consumer Culture and
Citizenship in the Wake of September 11th. After September 11th, advertisers used this
tragic event to capitalize, using patriotism as a reason to consume. Dickinson states that,
“rhetorically created, a particular type of citizen: the citizen whose patriotic duty was to
consumer in a post 9/11 world” (Dickinson, 296). By selling citizens the notion that their
consumption is action against terrorists, they falsely lead consumers to believe they were
helping. “The ads immediately following the attacks work to reconstitute Americans as
citizen consumers” (Dickinson 297). All the advertisements after September 11th consisted of American flags, tying back to Twitchell’s theory of myths and storytelling. By creating the myth of strong patriotic duty, they hope to increase sales in light of consumers being defensive and patriotic.

“This advertisement directly addresses the ways consumption and the tragedy go together. The advertisement suggests it is the wrong time to spend money on oneself. Instead, the money ought to be donated to survivors or victims” (Dickinson, 303)

This quote shows the ability of advertisers to profit off tragedies and make money by suggesting others need it more. Although completely legitimate, it sends the message that the only way to help is through consumption of products. This directly outlines the flaws in North American consumer culture, profiting off tragedies through promoting and advertising ‘solutions’.

With the WWF PSA, it is almost the opposite of the September 11th advertisements: it puts patriotism on the line, makes people defensive and enables guilt through their initial reaction. When Americans look at this, they could see it as challenging the attack on their country. To them, it could seem evident that it is not challenging the attack, but more putting it into perspective. It tried to encourage the acceptance of a more globalized sense of community, while looking at environmental issues and natural disasters on a global scale. Although it compares two completely different events, it would probably intend to be viewed as promoting a sense of social and global responsibility, taking both incidents into account as tragic. However, that is not how it would come across to most audiences, making it hard to reach the same conclusion. The challenges of this PSA are that the initial shock of this picture is almost too disrespectful to get the desired message across. It may be completely accurate in its
assumptions, and the death tolls in this case do not lie. However, it makes it challenging for a North American viewing this after seeing the impact of September 11th and not as much the 2004 Tsunami.

In conclusion, WWF’s PSA caused more controversy than it would have awareness. By playing one against another, it attempts to make the tsunami a bigger consequence, while actually making the terrorist attacks smaller. Through Twitchell’s theories, the importance of the story being created only shows its ineffectiveness even more. Through Williams’ interpretation of new advertising tactics, it shows how even if it is viewed as “magic”, there was not a whole lot the PSA solved. Finally, through Dickinson’s analysis of consumerism and citizenship after 9/11, it shows how creating a consumer approach to September 11th only lead patriotic Americans to spend more and receive less. By benefitting off tragedies, advertisers were able to create a sense of patriotic duty through consumption instead of using that patriotic duty for action and cause. The PSA was not effective in its methods, reaching its audience or delivering the awareness it had hoped for. WWF is a great organization but this PSA attacked and desensitized 9/11 in order to profit from sponsors and donations.
Endnotes


Bibliography


