

TITLE OF CASE STUDY: You Don't Have To Be Perfect To Be A Perfect Parent

Category

Non-profit/Public Service

Campaign

Adoption/Foster Care: "You Don't Have to Be Perfect to Be A Perfect Parent"

Summary

Thousands of children in the U.S. foster care system are in need of permanent, loving homes. Perhaps no public service campaign has ever had a more daunting call to action. Working with the Ad Council and The Collaboration to AdoptUsKids, Kirshenbaum Bond + Partners launched a public service campaign designed to inspire prospective adoptive parents to take the next step to learn more about adoption, particularly of children who are less likely to be adopted—those who are older, who are part of sibling groups, or who have special needs. An extensive research program led us to an unexpected, singular consumer insight that drives the entire campaign; namely, prospective parents' doubt in their own readiness to adopt or even more simply their fear of failing is the main barrier to action. The advertising needed to focus on changing the mindset of prospective parents—and *not* on the needs of the children, nor on various aspects of the foster/adoption system, as many previous campaigns facing the issue had done.

While the campaign was initially launched in 2004, in 2006 a new phase of the campaign focused on *teen* adoption. Results to date demonstrate that the campaign has helped to inspire literally thousands of prospective parents to begin the process, and thus affect the lives of thousands of children.

The Assignment

Kirshenbaum Bond + Partners were assigned to create a public service advertising campaign that would re-brand the issue of adoption, and encourage more prospective parents to take the next step and make an inquiry.

The campaign is sponsored by the Ad Council and the Collaboration to AdoptUsKids, a public-private collaboration of U.S. federal agencies and nonprofit organizations. AdoptUsKids helps coordinate recruitment activities among an array of state and local agencies.

The Situation

- More than 500,000 children are in the U.S. foster care system. Of these, nearly 120,000 are unable to safely return to their parents.
- While adoptions in the U.S. were running at high levels for the past 10 years it was international adoptions (triple the level of the early 90's) and private adoption agencies (record highs for nearly a decade) that were reaping the benefits. Older children (age 8+) are less likely to be placed with a permanent family. African American and Hispanic children, sibling groups and children with special needs are also less likely to be placed.
- Each year, approximately 20,000 young people "age out" of the system without ever having been adopted. They often have trouble transitioning to life on their own, and they are at higher risk for poverty, substance abuse, homelessness and incarceration.
- Internal survey research by the Ad Council and Lightspeed Research demonstrates that among 30 adult-targeted public service campaigns on its docket, the call to action of the adoption campaign stands apart. Only a small percentage of the adult public expresses any interest, and adoption is perceived by far as the most challenging call to action among 30 Ad Council issues.

The Campaign Objective

The campaign objectives are threefold: 1) Solicit sufficient donated media to increase exposure; 2) Inspire more prospective parents to make inquiries about the adoption process, primarily through adoptuskids.org or a toll-free number; 3) Ultimately increase the number of adoptions, particularly of older/teenage children.

The Target Audience

Prospective parents: people who were interested in adopting but had not yet acted on their interest. They varied in age, gender, ethnicity, marital status etc. One commonality our research showed was that they were impressive human beings, actively in their communities. They attended Church, coached Little League, and some were even temporary foster parents. Most of them spoke of foster adoption as a personal calling they'd been contemplating for many years.

The Key Challenge

Adopting a child from foster care is a commitment few people want to take on. What can advertising do to spark interest among the select few who have contemplated it?

The Research Story

Strategic Research

A thorough review of the secondary literature, plus a series of expert interviews, helped us understand the large scope of need, and gave us insight into the adoption process. An important finding is that the qualification process is often perceived by prospective parents as daunting and bureaucratic. Moreover, many prospective parents are concerned about the “baggage” an older child may bring into their home.

Our own qualitative research that yielded the insight that fueled the campaign; namely, that we had to acknowledge the self-doubts of the target. We conducted a series mini-focus groups in four markets (in NJ, CA, KS, TX). The set-up was unique: in a moderated discussion, prospective parents were put in the same room as parents who had been through the process. Their rich and candid interaction allowed us to hone in on what was most essential—in their own minds—to the decision to adopt. We asked prospective parents to keep weeklong diaries and picture books, which also helped us understand their mindset.

Evaluative Research

Once creative concepts were developed, we returned to similar participants in the same markets to conduct communications checks, using photoboards and scripts. One campaign idea clearly rose to the top as a winner, and feedback on the spots was extremely positive. Communications checks were conducted again prior to the production of the 2006 round of work. Also, in 2006 we conducted a quantitative copy test of old and new TV and radio spots, in partnership with HarrisInteractive. Copy test results largely confirmed earlier qualitative consumer feedback, especially in terms of relatively high scores for likeability, comprehension and motivation.

The effectiveness and impact of the campaign was measured through several instruments. To help determine the reach of the campaign, the Ad Council monitored and reported donated media support, as well as news media support. We fielded a national tracking study (online, 500 adults 21+ per wave) with the help of Insight Express that helped us chart national trends in awareness, ad recognition and interest in adoption. In 2006, an evaluative quantitative copy test was conducted with HarrisInteractive (2 TV executions, 2 radio executions). Most importantly—because this is in a sense a direct response campaign—we monitored fulfillment trends to the campaign website and toll-free number, along with email inquiries to AdoptUsKids and home-study registrations through AdoptUsKids.

Key Insight

Despite their obvious interest, something was still holding them back. They had many questions. Some were about the system. Others were about how to handle older kids with issues like how difficult is it to form a bond in the middle of developmental years. Their real questions though, were about themselves. The system and current advertising had created a doubt in their minds about their ability to pull this off. The one question they really needed answered was “CAN I DO THIS?” Here

we understood the magnitude of the idea we were selling. This wasn't a temporary commitment like donating time or even being a foster parent. **We were selling permanent relationships with no return policy.**

The Creative Strategy: You don't have to be perfect to be an adoptive parent.

The system and the advertising messages had created a belief in our prospects that they had to be perfect to adopt a foster child. They held this particular task up on a pedestal so high, that they might never be ready to act on their interest. The role of the advertising was to remove the idea of foster adoption from its pedestal. We also needed to create an idea that would extend beyond advertising to help sustain our prospect's confidence throughout the process. So, we developed a creative idea that demonstrated to prospective parents that it wasn't about being perfect but it was about the little things that ANY parent would do for a child in a permanent relationship.

Some of the advertising directly challenged the existing communications surrounding the issue and let parents know that being a child's hero did not have to be as monumental as the others had been making it feel. Instead the advertising saluted the little things that any parent would do for their child in a "permanent" relationship like watching TV with them, getting a ball from a basketball hoop when it was stuck or ironing their clothes. Most importantly it demonstrated to prospective parents that these kids, more than anything else, wanted someone to be there every day. The message: You don't have to be a hero to be a hero. Other ads saluted the little things that parents did when they goofed up – and showed adoptive parents making mistakes in an effort to bond with the child. Again, the idea was simple: You don't have to be perfect to be a perfect parent.

In 2006, with the even more challenging focus on teens, we determined that the basic strategy remained sound. Two adjustments were made to the creative. Campaign visuals featured teenagers and "typical" teenager scenarios. And the end copy was changed in all ads from "You don't have to be perfect to be a perfect parent. When you adopt a child from foster care, just being there makes all the difference." to "You don't have to be perfect to be a perfect parent. There are thousands of teens in foster care who would love to put up with you."

When we were asked to focus on teen adoption in 2006, additional consumer discussions and expert interviews revealed that this strategy is even more compelling in the context of teen adoption. Our main adjustment in the new spots was the end copy,

Campaign Elements

2004 work included:

4 TV ads (multiple lengths)

2 radio ads (multiple lengths)

4 newspaper/magazine ads (multiple sizes)

Multiple online banners

Press outreach, including a satellite TV and radio tour, Bites n' B-Roll package

PR Event – Hosting the "Heart Gallery" event at Union Station in Washington, DC

2006 work

2004 work included:

4 TV ads (multiple lengths)

2 radio ads (multiple lengths)

4 newspaper/magazine ads (multiple sizes)

Multiple online banners

Press outreach, including a satellite TV and radio tour, Bites n' B-Roll package

PR Event – Hosting the "Heart Gallery" event at Union Station in Washington, DC

Results

Donated Media Support

Campaign materials were distributed and marketed to media outlets nationwide. The donated media support was significant, especially given the "niche" status of this public service issue. To date, the campaign has garnered an estimated \$118 million in donated media.

	June 2004- Sept 2006
English Broadcast TV	5,837,196
Spanish Broadcast TV	363,614
Network Cable Television	876,672
Local Cable Television	17,673,830
English Radio	84,055,160
Spanish Radio	978,920
Newspaper	1,024,543
Magazine & Business Press	1,807,601
Web Banners	2,498,096
Alternative Media	1,394,400
Public Relations	1,659,120
Total:	118,169,152

Tracking Survey

Postwave surveys (conducted in May 2005 and August 2006) provide two key findings:

- Awareness: Approximately one-quarter of adults 21+ nationwide have aided recognition of at least one Adoption broadcast (TV or radio) PSA.
- Those with awareness of a broadcast PSA were significantly more likely to say that they were “very” or “somewhat” interested in adopting a child from foster care (33% of those aware of the ads vs. 23% of those not aware).

Fulfillment (July 2004-December 2006)

The campaign is primarily evaluated by direct response results, representing the number of people who chose to take the next step.

- 27,101 calls to the toll-free number, representing an increase of more than 230% compared to pre-campaign launch.
- 7,924,301 web visitor sessions to adoptuskids.org, for a total of 485,119,975 page views, representing an increase of more than 40% compared to pre-campaign launch.
- 27,010 email inquiries through the website asking for more information.
- 11,912 prospective parents registered for a home study through AdoptUsKids.

Because the adoption process is fairly lengthy, and because there are many other avenues to adopt foster children aside from AdoptUsKids, it is difficult to estimate with much accuracy the exact number of children the campaign has helped. It is safe to say the campaign has helped spur activity that has affected the lives of thousands of foster children.

Conclusions

Innovative exploratory research laid the groundwork for a single-minded strategy that fundamentally changed the way this issue was approached. It led us to an entirely new way of advertising and provided new hope for tackling this enormous task. The insight and the strategy has been embraced at every level of AdoptUskids and not only fueled creative work but internal behaviors and practices as well. Despite the enormity of what we are asking, thousands of adults have heeded the call and followed their hearts to contact AdoptUsKids. While quantitative copy test, tracking and fulfillment research have helped contextualize the success of the campaign, perhaps no piece of information is

more powerful than the anecdotal reports we hear back from the field. As one AdoptUsKids staff member related,

M.G. and her husband are parents of a six-year-old girl. They always wanted more children, but after two miscarriages, they despaired. One day recently, her daughter said, 'Mommy, you don't need to have another baby. There's a number on TV that you can call to find children who need families.' M.G. replied, 'Honey, let's get that number!' They did get the number, they promptly called, and after speaking to us, they are excitedly planning the next steps. M.G. credited her daughter with their breakthrough and reported, 'We decided we're going to adopt as a family. All three of us are in this together.'