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USING ONE-MINUTE TELEVISION SPOTS TO EDUCATE THE PUBLIC ABOUT FORESTRY

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ABSTRACT: In the Pacific Northwest, as in much of the United States, conflicting views among environmentalists, forest industries, government agencies, and policy makers have left the public with a confused picture of forestry issues and practices. So, it should come as no surprise when citizens base their opinions of natural resource issues on incomplete or inaccurate information.

To help combat this problem, the College of Forestry at Oregon State University and the Oregon Forest Resources Institute (OFRI) recently combined forces to create and broadcast seven one-minute television spots based on the latest scientific information about managing Oregon's forests. These spots were educational in nature, not promotional. They were designed to meet the public's desire for science-based information about how their forests are managed. It was hoped that seeing these messages would help viewers make better decisions about their use of natural resources, become more informed and effective participants in policy decisions regarding forests and forest products, and better understand how forests and forestry affect their lives. Their purpose was not to convince viewers that forest practices of the past (or present) are inherently good or bad. Unlike public service announcements, these spots were broadcast frequently and at prime time to reach the target audiences most effectively.

A cooperative team approach was adopted to design and produce the series of TV spots. Each team included media specialists and forest scientists from the College of Forestry, public opinion researchers, mass media experts, and OFRI personnel. Ideas leading to the content of the television spots came primarily from information collected from public opinion polls and focus groups. The design team used this information to identify areas of forest management of greatest concern to the public, and to generate key messages. Scientists whose research was germane to these key messages were identified and invited to help get the word out to the public. A flexible "give and take" between the media specialists and scientists led to the creation of a visual story and "television friendly" script.

It was decided early on that the look and feel of the TV spots should be one of real scientists in the field telling their stories in simple but information-rich presentations. The decision to use non-professional talent was a conscious one; what these scientists lacked in sophisticated on-camera delivery, they made up for in credibility with the viewers.

Both formative and summative reviews were an integral part of the production process. Draft videos were reviewed by panels of content specialists, other media producers, OFRI staff and board members, mass media specialists, and select members of the target audience. In addition, an electronic Perception Analyzer¬ session was used to glean information about moment-to-moment audience reactions to the first three television spots. Use of such group response measuring systems are common in marketing research.

From 1994 to 1997, seven television spots were produced and broadcast during prime time. Air-time was purchased separately for each spot, usually in two-week increments, with approximately six months between each spot. Each program was broadcast repeatedly and on multiple channels throughout the state during its "life." As a result, each spot had the potential to be viewed tens of millions of times, a term referred to in the broadcast industry as "gross impressions". In 1996 alone, gross impressions for two of the forestry spots totaled over 19 million.

While we know the tremendous potential of these educational messages, assessing their actual impact is much more difficult. It is very different from evaluating classroom instruction. For example, we could not pre- and post-test the viewing public to see what they knew about forestry issues before and after viewing the TV spots. Nor could we contact specific viewers to see what they thought about specific messages. However, a compelling amount of anecdotal and some quantitative evidence arose indicating that these spots had captured the attention of the public, the industry, and the forestry community. This evidence included comments collected from focus groups, interviews with stakeholders, letters from the public, and even monetary gifts to the College in support of further TV spot development. Perhaps the highest form of flattery was (and continues to be) the use of our "scientist in the forest" approach by numerous television spots produced by the forest industry.

Although our primary motive was educational, there is also evidence that the TV spots left the public with a more positive perception of forestry. After broadcast of the first three television spots, phone survey data from 650 randomly selected Oregonians revealed an increase of 15 % (±4%) in the approval rating for forest management activities in Oregon and a 7% (±4%) increase in those who believed that forest industry was doing "an excellent or above-average job learning from science to manage forests better." While we cannot presume that the TV spots were solely responsible for positively "moving the needle" on public opinion, the proximity of the ad campaign to this data suggest that the spots played a significant part.

We've learned a number of valuable lessons from this television-based education campaign:

It IS possible to deliver important educational messages in 60 seconds, but it takes a great deal of thought and effort.

It IS possible to capture the attention of television viewers with short natural resource-related messages, but it must be done during prime time-and that's expensive. The cost of broadcasting the messages will far exceed the cost of producing them.

Television viewers WILL respond positively to information-rich, science-based television spots. They want to know facts about resource issues, and they look to the scientific community for unbiased information.

University faculty are well positioned to provide natural resource information to television viewers, and they may well be the most effective spokespersons for their positions-but they need assistance in identifying key messages, in crafting concise "TV-friendly" statements, and in illustrating their points effectively.

Formative evaluation (continual review from the widest possible variety of sources) is key to producing effective messages.

Efforts to educate and influence public opinion on natural resource issues will benefit from teamwork among public agencies, university communication specialists, public opinion specialists, scientists, and mass media experts.