Poster Children

What makes a winning AIDS prevention campaign?

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From France to Philadelphia, 2006 was the year of controversy and misfired messaging in AIDS prevention campaigns. Billboards in Los Angeles proclaiming HIV IS A GAY DISEASE hoped to raise awareness among gay men but also sparked outcries from activists claiming that the slogan increased stigma and damaged efforts to reach other at-risk populations. A San Francisco–based campaign aimed at African-American men enraged onlookers with a sexist suggestion: DON'T BE A BITCH: USE A CONDOM. The list continues, with other ads pulled for dirty language ("fuck," in London) or violent connotations (rifle crosshairs, in Philadelphia).

These efforts are part of a recent boom in AIDS prevention campaigns, following a dearth in the late '90s—often attributed to HAART's debut and so-called AIDS fatigue. Indeed, the word *AIDS* no longer shocks people into listening. No wonder, then, that 25 years into the epidemic, advocates are struggling to find effective methods to make people stop, think and act.

Most AIDS campaigns to date have fallen into one of three categories: celebrity-based, educational or fear-driven. "I don't think there is one magical message," says Tina Hoff, director of entertainment media partnerships at the Kaiser Family Foundation, which consults on AIDS campaigns worldwide. "We've taken a variety of approaches." So does a famous face define AIDS as cool and inspire action? "The celebrities need to stand behind what they say. People are pretty good at sniffing out a spokesperson who is not credible and dismissing the message," says Hoff. The popular Keep a Child Alive campaign runs in sleek glossies and features superstars such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Iman covered in tribal paint with the somewhat befuddling caption "I am African". The org's executive director, Leigh Blake, says of the ads, "We want to snap people's heads and have them say, 'What? Why the hell are they saying they are African?' and then look into it." She says that the strategy is working and that the org's website hits are up by millions since the launch.

Other campaigns show stats and preach condom use. But are people desensitized to tragic numbers and pleas? "We have to break through the clutter," says Hoff. "We work with top talent creating the messaging young people are buzzing about." Campaigns such as BET's "Rap It Up" hiply encourage testing and sexual responsibility. After they air, reports Hoff, calls to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) AIDS hot line spike.

As for just plain scaring people, a campaign sponsored by French org AIDES depicted Superman and Wonder Woman in hospital beds, wasting away from AIDS with a caption that translates to: “Everyone should worry about AIDS. Protect yourself.” (This fall, DC Comics, which owns the rights to the heroes, demanded an end to the campaign.) “You want to tell people that HIV remains a problem,” says Hoff. “But you don’t want people to be so afraid that they won’t get tested or operate with denial.” Olivier Denoue of AIDES says, “We try to reach different people, and some people are most touched by the idea of a death sentence.” There may be no ideal AIDS ad, but with new domestic infections holding steady for a decade, the failure of existing ones is glaring. Here’s an idea: Ask the people who have it.

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