

■ Fear messages in marketing

Given what we have agreed about the two-way nature of communication and the need for empathy and shared understanding, it seems inappropriate to ask generic questions about whether certain sorts of messages work better than others. The answer is bound to be 'it depends' - on circumstances, past communications, available channels and so on. Above all, it depends on the audience. And yet precisely this question has been asked again and again about fear messages.

Thus, several attempts have been made to develop a theory to explain and predict how fear works, but the results are inconclusive. Three alternative models have emerged. First, the curvilinear model posits that fear *can* persuade up to a threshold of tolerance, beyond which it becomes counter-productive.

Second, Leventhal's (1970) parallel response model proposes that emotional and cognitive factors act independently to mediate behaviour, with emotional factors affecting internal attempts to cope with the threat (e.g. by rationalizing or rejecting it), whilst cognitive factors will determine the behaviour change.

Finally, Rogers's (1975) expectancy-valence model states that the effectiveness of a fear-arousing communication is a function of three variables: the magnitude of the threat; the probability of its occurrence; and the efficacy of the advocated protective response. It is proposed that these three

variables will interact to produce a level of 'protection motivation' within an individual and that this will determine the level of change.

The research into the effectiveness of fear appeals is inconclusive, but the majority of studies show a positive relationship between fear arousal and persuasion (Higbee, 1969). More specifically, the following conclusions have been drawn:

- Fear appeals can raise awareness of an issue and bring it to the forefront of people's thoughts
- Fear appeals can make people re-evaluate and change their attitudes
- Fear may be successful in stimulating an intention to change behaviour sometime in the future
- In some cases *immediate* behaviour change takes place shortly after exposure to a fear communication.

In summary, therefore, whilst the findings do vary considerably between studies, broadly speaking it is true to say that the research supports the use of fear appeals. The problem, however, is that the research has been very narrowly focused, typically using experiments in laboratory settings, to ask very specific and short-term questions. As we have seen, the resulting answers can, with some difficulty, be resolved into a coherent picture, but many other questions are left begging. Most importantly, it is not clear what happens outside the laboratory, where there is much less control, or what the long-term and wider effects of fear appeals are.

Marketing provides a rubric for asking these bigger questions. Have a try at Exercise 5.2.

Exercise 5.2

Fear in traffic safety

You have just been appointed as Head of Communications at the Transport Accident Commission in Victoria, Australia. They have used fear messages consistently for the last 15 years. Log on to their website (<http://www.tacsafety.com.au>) and click on 'Campaigns' followed by any of the campaign topics to view some of the road safety ads. As a social marketer, what questions does their approach raise? You might like to consider the following more specific questions:

- (a) What will our clients do with the message?
- (b) What benefits will they get from it?
- (c) How will it affect our brand name?
- (d) How will it affect their feelings for our other products?
- (e) What about our non-targets who will also see the message?
- (f) What are our competitors doing?
- (g) Where do we go from here?
- (h) What about alternative approaches?
- (i) Is our message ethically acceptable?

(a) What will our clients do with the message?

Outside the laboratory, audiences can choose whether or not to accept our messages; they cannot be compelled to pay attention any more than they can be compelled to drive safely or give up smoking. This creates several potential barriers: the audience may not look at the message at all; they may look at it, but ignore it; they may look at it and accept it, but misunderstand it; they may look at it and understand it, but rationalize it (e.g. 'that couldn't happen to me', 'there are other greater risks' or simply 'life is risky'). All of these barriers – especially the last – can be accentuated by fear appeals (look at point 1 in Box 5.2). In a world where mass media messages are an optional extra, it may make more sense to use subtlety and compromise than brute force.

At a more fundamental level, it is arguable that campaigns employing extreme fear appeals, such as those used in Victoria by the Transport Accident Commission (Exercise 5.2), undermine the whole notion of voluntary behaviour. The ads literally say accept our message or 'you're a bloody idiot'. The danger is that people will reject such uncompromising approaches, or like characters in David Cronenberg's movie *Crash*, even do the opposite of what is proposed. This latter response is not as far-fetched as it may sound. Recent focus groups conducted at the Institute for Social Marketing suggested that certain young men enjoy gory road safety ads in the same way as horror movies: 'that was a cracker that one', 'that's brilliant that, when you saw her face get smashed up', 'really clever', 'and you hear it go bang, crack!'. Social change practitioners would no doubt be appalled to discover they are competing with violent pornographers!

(b) What benefits will they get from it?

Voluntary behaviour is benefit driven, so paying attention to mass media messages, just like buying Coca-Cola or driving safely, must provide the target with something they want. As Barry Day, vice-chair of McCann-Erickson Worldwide, expressed it: 'I believe an ad should be a reward.' The question then is 'what reward does a fear appeal offer?' and, by extension, is being upset, scared and/or discomfited much of a reward?

(c) How will it affect our brand name?

Coca-Cola, Nike and Marlboro will all be very careful to ensure that any ads they produce not only work effectively in their own right, but also enhance or (at the very least) do no damage to the company and the product's good name – typically encapsulated in the brand. Most successful brands are the result of decades of careful effort and design.

Social marketing organizations have their equivalents of brands; they have an image and reputation with the public. The question then is how do fear appeals affect this reputation? Do claims that are felt to be exaggerated, or at least not to reflect people's everyday experience, discredit the communicator?

Do messages that cause short-term offence, but which might be justified by high awareness figures, do long-term damage to the sender's good name?

(d) How will it affect their feelings for our other products?

Fear messages say something about the absolute risk of the behaviour being addressed, but also imply things about the relative risk of other behaviours. Take traffic safety as an example: a very fearful anti-drink campaign may lead audiences to assume that other driving behaviours, such as speeding, are less dangerous. Focus groups with young drivers conducted recently at the University of Wollongong in New South Wales (see Box 5.2) showed that whilst drink-driving and speeding were recognized as risky behaviours, others such as driving at night and driving whilst under the influence of marijuana were not. Indeed, some respondents interpreted the constant messaging on drink-driving as implicitly endorsing the alternative of marijuana use. The option of extending the traffic topics addressed by fear messages to cover all potential risks is equally problematic. It would likely lead to overload and rationalization: 'I know the roads are dangerous, but I have to get on with my life.'

Box 5.2 Young Australian drivers and the use of fear

Focus groups with young (18- to 24-year-old) drivers conducted recently at the University of Wollongong in New South Wales revealed worrying tendencies in their response to fear-based messages. The discussions examined response to ads they had seen on television in the last few months and years, which had been dominated by hard-hitting messages on drink-driving and speeding. Three findings stand out:

1. The young drivers were becoming inured to fear messages and numerous comments were made about being tired of being told what to do and that speeding and drink-driving are dangerous.

'The ads are all the same, can't speed, can't drink and drive or you will crash – so what? Everyone knows that ... they don't stop me.'

(male, 18)

'Ever since I can remember the ads have been about what happens when you speed ... I stopped taking any notice of them ages ago.'

(female, 21)

'The ads are silly, the latest ad shows a guy crashing this big powerful car after speeding and killing people, then right after is an ad for the same car showing these young guys enjoying themselves in it ... I just turn off from the anti-speeding ads now.'

(male, 23)

2. Other risky driving behaviours such as driving at night or with lots of friends in the car were not even on their radar. As long as they did not speed or drink they felt they were okay.

'I guess other things are dangerous but not as bad as speeding and drink-driving.'

(male, 17)

'I don't think there is a problem if you have four or five of your mates in the car with you.'

(male, 18)

'No one has said that driving at night is more dangerous than driving at daytime ... have they?'

(female, 22)

3. Dysfunctional solutions emerged from the narrow focus on alcohol – most notably, the less well educated of the young people were inclined to see no problem with marijuana use and driving. The broader idea of mind-altering substances in general impairing driving had been lost.

'Smoking some weed then driving home isn't as dangerous as having a heap of beers at a party.'

(female, 17)

'When I go out and if I'm driving and I had a choice between dope and alcohol then it's a no brainer ... you're safer with the dope.'

(male, 20)

'I have a friend and he thinks his driving improves when he has had some herb.'

(male, 24)

It is also worth remembering that road use is only one source of danger in people's life (and danger is only one source of problems). For example, tobacco use kills more people in Europe than traffic, crime, and accidents in the home and workplace combined.

Fear messages need to reflect this reality, if only for ethical reasons.

(e) What about our non-targets who will also see the message?

Targeting is an important aspect of marketing: only well-targeted products and messages can really satisfy customer needs. However, messages transmitted in the mass media will inevitably reach other people as well as the intended target. Sticking with road safety, TV ads aimed at 18- to

24-year-old 'boy racers' will also reach older drivers. The use of fear in these circumstances can have two untoward effects. First, it may breed complacency among older speeding drivers by implying that deaths on the roads are the fault of other inexperienced and unskilled drivers. Second, it may cause unwarranted anxiety among other road users, perhaps discouraging parents from letting their children play outside or walk to school.

(f) What are our competitors doing?

As we will discuss in Chapter 8, social marketers frequently have to compete with commerce. Tobacco, alcohol, fast-food, car producers - amongst others - frequently push in the opposite direction. Even a cursory look at their advertising shows that they make relatively little use of fear.

(g) Where do we go from here?

Fear appeals present both creative and strategic problems. On the creative front, once fear has been used, there is a need to increase it on each subsequent occasion to have the same impact. At what point does this cross the threshold of acceptability? On the other hand, is there a point at which people become inured? (Have another look at Box 5.2.)

Turning to strategy, if marketing tells us that success is dependent on building long-term relationships with the customer, the strategic question becomes: is fear a good basis for a relationship? Even parents rapidly abandon it as a pedagogical option as their offspring leave early childhood.

(h) What about alternative approaches?

It is clear then that fear approaches present considerable costs to social marketers. The main benefit it offers is a high profile: strong emotional messages attract a lot of attention. But other approaches can also have a strong emotional pull - love, excitement, sex, hope, humour and sophistication are all used successfully by commercial advertisers. The key issue therefore is not 'should fear appeals be used?' but 'will they do the job better and more efficiently than alternative approaches?'

(i) Is our message ethically acceptable?

The final question a marketer will ask (or be compelled to ask by the relevant regulatory authorities) is 'do our messages meet normal ethical standards?' Will people be hurt or damaged by them? The fact that we social marketers tend to fight on the side of the angels does not absolve us from this responsibility. The end cannot be used to justify the means.