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## Increasing Focus on the Difficult Issue of Discussing the Cost of Care with Patients

BY ERIC T. ROSENTHAL

**A**SCO is readying a “Guidance Statement” on the cost of cancer care, expected to be published in July in *JCO*. In addition, one of the seven highlighted studies the Society selected for a teleconference two weeks before the Annual Meeting showed that a “significant minority” of patients in clinical trials feel anxious or adopt coping strategies to be able to pay for supportive medications. The same study also documented that cost is rarely discussed among patients and physicians.

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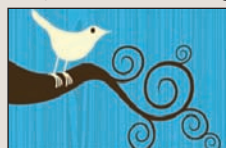


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# TV's Public Service Announcements

BY ANDREW HOLTZ, MPH



The clock ticks through 3,600 seconds each hour. Each tick measures the precious real estate of TV broadcasts. Viewers turn on and tune in for the programming. Comedy, drama, news, and spectacle fill just shy of three out of four ticks in the average TV hour. Much of the money to pay for it all is made in the remainder—almost 1,000 seconds per hour.

After programming, ads, and promos, there are a few odd scraps of ticks left over. That's where you'll find PSAs, those public service announcements calling attention to community groups or exhorting us to buckle up, take a bite out of crime, prevent forest fires, watch your brain on drugs, and so on.

A survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation last year tallied up all the ticks of the TV hours over a full week on 10 major national broadcast and cable networks—more than six million seconds in all. The result: On average, of the 3,600 ticks in an hour, donated PSAs get 17. That's half of one percent of TV time. And in prime time, the meat is sliced to just nine seconds an hour.

One of the report's authors, Vicky Rideout at the Kaiser Family Foundation, noted that PSA creators face a challenging environment. "Groups that go into it need to do so with their eyes open. They need to evaluate the magnitude of the investment they're going to make, make a good evaluation of whether it's worth it, whether they're going to get the payoff." The payoff being behavior change, awareness, or fundraising.

But I'm not going to impose on your attention simply to moan about the crumbs of time given to PSAs. The survey confirms the findings in a 2002 report that it's not news that on network TV, PSAs are few and far between. And since there are no signs of any shifts in regulation or market forces, the TV timescape is unlikely to change.

Does that mean that public service announcements are irrelevant? Nope. Take a glance back at that short blast of venerable PSA slogans I listed above. Even though you might have to glue your eyes to the tube for two or three hours to encounter one 30-second PSA, somehow those mantras do stick in your brain, right? And that's why it's worth understanding what makes PSAs work—or fail.

## Report Online

The full Kaiser Family Foundation report is available at [www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia012408pkg.cfm](http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia012408pkg.cfm)



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But efforts to use PSAs to mold the zeitgeist are both more difficult and more constrained than most people realize. Got a burning issue you want everyone to know about, and believe that shouting out through a PSA will get your message out?

### Message Has to Be 'Clean and Clear'

"Oh, gosh, no!" That's the response of Priscilla Natkins at The Ad Council. The coalition of organizations and media companies started as a group to sell War Bonds in 1941. "We say that an issue has to be a PSA-able; meaning that it has to be a call to action, an attitude change, or behavioral shift that can be distilled down to a simple thought; and you are asking for something very concrete."

While the big problems in our world, including health threats, have complex sources and solutions, a PSA has to be clean and clear. Among her examples: "Asthma: It's chronic." "Mental health stigma: Be there for a friend."

Keep in mind that getting even 30 seconds is becoming a rare treat on TV. More PSA slots are merely 15 seconds, 10 seconds, even just five-second bursts on the station identification screen that each broadcaster posts hourly.

The messages in effective PSAs may appear simple, but they are built on thorough research into intended audiences. However, the audience isn't always what you would expect.

"We want to be motivating, and we want to be impactful, and we want to be provocative, to a point," says Natkins. "But we have two target audiences: the consumer, who we want to reach, and the public service advertising director, who decides whether to play the work. If you are buying media you can be a little more provocative, but there is a line in the sand that we can't cross. If you turn off the PSA director, it's never going to get run."

So even when the objective is to get teenage risk-takers to pay attention, learn, and change, the message has to be palatable to much older and well-settled middle managers. That's a tough, sometimes impossible, feat of communications gymnastics.

Piles of research show that slogans like "Just Say No to Drugs" and the original "D.A.R.E." (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program fail to change the behavior of youth, despite their popularity among mature supporters.

As Natkins mentioned, if you buy airtime, you don't have to kowtow to PSA directors; but be prepared to bring a big wallet. CDC "Best Practices" guidelines for tobacco-control programs point out that states with effective counter-marketing campaigns spend up to \$3 per capita. California spent almost \$16 million dollars during the 2007-08 budget year on its anti-smoking media campaign as part of a comprehensive program with a total budget of almost \$80 million. Making an impact with PSAs requires much more than just good intentions.

"Policymakers have a tendency to give lip service to public service campaigns. There's a knee-jerk reaction that if they're trying to attack a particular problem, they say, 'Oh, I know, let's do some PSAs on it,' without giving real thought to the amount of money and effort that's going to be involved if you really want to get good airtime for it," Rideout says.

I've focused here on TV. Of course, the Internet is reshaping the media landscape; but TV is still the biggie when it comes to pushing messages into our eyes and ears. Ashton Kutcher recently made headlines when he beat CNN to the Twitter milestone of a million "followers." To put that new media breakthrough in perspective, even the struggling CW network gets twice that many viewers for its primetime shows.

TV and all the other forms of mass media powerfully shape what we see and thus believe about the world beyond our doors, but if you have an urge to change the world by shouting out with a PSA, remember that there are 3,600 ticks in each hour of TV, and PSAs get just 17. ☐

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