

RUTH WOODEN

Public Agenda

rwooden@

publicagenda.com

THE AIM OF THIS PERSONAL ACCOUNT is to share a career path in social marketing and highlight the power of advertising to bring about positive social change. Half my working life has been spent in traditional marketing and advertising and the other half in nonprofit management, albeit still as a communications professional. Today, as president of Public Agenda, the nonpartisan public opinion organization started in 1975 by Dan Yankelovich and Cyrus Vance, I am utilizing everything I learned as an advertising professional in advising policy leaders what it will take to advance significant new policy ideas. Public Agenda is best known for our work on public school reform issues, including a great deal of analysis of teacher attitudes, training, and experience in the classroom. (I've come to wonder how it is that *anyone* becomes a teacher today. The work is *that* difficult.) We are also highly regarded for work on foreign policy and the nation's long-term fiscal challenges. So how did I end up here and what does my advertising background have to do with any of these matters?

My working life has come full circle, back to the business of researching people's attitudes and discovering the unique insights that can change the world as we know it. My career, like so many things, started with a fluke. During my junior year at the University of Minnesota, I was recommended by my statistics professor for a part-time job, working in the market research department at the Pillsbury Company.

This was my first experience with market research, but I discovered an instinct for knowing a good question from a bad one—or at least which questions would truly reveal the respondent's honest opinion. I asked my boss if I could try my hand at writing questionnaires, and that was the Start of my consumer marketing career.

After that first experience, I worked for a market research company in St. Louis, had a stint as a brand manager at Ralston Purina (on dog and cat

food products no less), and worked as an account person at NW Ayer in New York, mostly on corporate assignments such as Avon, ATT, and DeBeers.

The introduction to nonprofit communications came in 1986, when I volunteered on an Advertising Council campaign for teen alcohol prevention and fell in love with using advertising to promote "good for you" behavior and ideas.

The following year marked the beginning of my social marketing career, when I was named president of the Advertising Council. The appointment was in no small part due to a strong recommendation from Lou Hagopian, then CEO of Ayer, and a search committee ready to entrust the Council to a relatively unknown, youngish, female advertising professional.

During nearly 12 years at the Advertising Council, I came to really understand the power of advertising to persuade people to think differently about how to take care of themselves, make change in their community, and create whole new social norms of behavior. The combination of discipline in the development of the creative strategy brief, and the talent of creative professionals, created powerful and compelling campaigns that literally changed social behavior.

I learned many things about how the advertising phenomenon worked in this arena, but two things stand out in particular. First, the discipline of what I now refer to as the "Seven Questions" emerged. This was a variation on the strategy brief development process that I had learned at Ayer. What was second nature to those of us at Ayer was absolutely foreign to most of the Advertising Council "clients," leaders from various government departments or nonprofit organizations that worked with advertising professionals at the Council and at advertising agencies. Most of these people were policy wonks or social change advocates, and they were long on data and information and generally short on creativity. Don't get

me wrong, I greatly admired these people, and T wanted more than anything to help them achieve their important missions. But they were swimming in facts, numbers, and policy speak and needed help getting to the real heart of the matter.

So, asking the Seven Questions revealed that most public sector clients had not given much thought to critical areas of advertising strategy development. The questions were:

1. Who do you *really* want to talk to?
2. What do you know about your audience in terms of demographics and psychographics?
3. What do they know or think now about the attitude or behavior you want to change?
4. What *exactly* do you want them to change about the way they think or act?
5. What is the single most important fact or insight that can change their behavior or attitude?
6. What is the most important barrier to overcome or what is getting in the way of changing their behavior or attitude?
7. What is the "net impression" (in the vernacular) that you want to create by the campaign?

All of these questions were ultimately designed to simplify the clients' thinking and get rid of a lot of generic or fuzzy ideas about what they thought would work. As it turned out, these were difficult questions to answer. Most of our clients thought they wanted to talk to the "general public," or the "informed public," and they believed that if this public "only knew ABC, they would do XYZ." It was often just a matter of "they don't know" or "they need this information." I came to hate the terms "public information campaign" and "public education campaign" (favorite expressions of gov-

ernment clients) as they symbolized the notion that the problem or barrier to overcome was a "simple lack of information." If left to their own devices, most of these well-meaning professionals would develop social marketing campaigns that look and sound like strategy briefs writ large.

And so the second most important observation I made during those years about the power of advertising was to try to debunk the notion that these kinds of attitude and behavior changes involved primarily rational behavior. Professionals who work in traditional business environments and those who work in the non-profit, government, and policy sectors have very different mindsets. For people who toil in the vineyards of charitable work, social policy, and government affairs, their daily business is charts, records, evaluation, analysis, and frequent oral presentations to officials and board members who seem to revel in excruciating detail. The idea that attitude or behavior change can emerge from an emotional response is really almost anathema to them. That said, when they do see the "difference" and the powerful impact of emotional calls to action, they are among the most appreciative clients you will ever find in advertising.

In the past 20 years, the Advertising Council has provided many examples of how the advertising discipline can inject powerful new norms of behavior into society. Here are just a few examples. A pair of crashing glasses and the powerful line "Friends don't let friends drive drunk" led to numerous changes in behavior, state laws, and the emergence of the "designated driver." Teens could be persuaded not to smoke when they believed that they had been lied to and taken for suckers—a much more compelling way to rebel against adults than to take up cigarettes. And advertising professionals helped identify that organ donation was a

decision made by family members at one of the worst times in their lives. A straightforward campaign to "tell your family what your wishes are *before* that time" was much more helpful to the hospital personnel who have to make those requests than more messages about how many people need transplants.

It is equally likely that the advertising approach of both keen strategy development and creative genius can help develop social values and norms that literally invert the way we see the world. Recently, I have been actively working on changing the way people view retirement. For a whole host of reasons, I believe that it is not healthy or economically feasible for our society and for most individuals to waste the experience and talents gained from a lifetime of work. But a powerful norm about retirement has developed over the past 50 years or so that suggests that is exactly what people should do when they reach "retirement age."

Interestingly, this norm was almost entirely invented by marketing and advertising. Remember Sun City, Del Webb's unique contribution to real estate fantasies? The imagery of fun in the sun, golf, exotic travel, and perpetual leisure took hold as American business sought ways to incorporate returning GIs and later the Baby Boomers into the work force by encouraging senior workers to leave the work world behind. This became the aspirational goal of working adults, and entire industries, most notably the financial services industry, rose up to help fulfill this dream.

Today, we need a new image of retirement, one that takes into account circumstances that have changed dramatically since Del Webb built that first retirement community in Arizona. Perpetual leisure is one thing when we are talking about financing 5 to 10 years of living in retirement. It's another when we are looking at

20 to 30 years of healthy living beyond our so-called "working career." How many of you have heard the refrain, "I'll die if I don't find something to do?"

I'd like to see that "something to do" become the equivalent of an "Encore Career"—a new stage of work that combines the experience and talent of the upcoming Baby Boomer retirees, the social and civic needs of our communities, and the personal passion to leave a legacy bigger than one's bank account. Encore Careers could be as intense as work before "retirement," or much more flexible. Encore Careers do not have to be for pay, but we all know that the level of commitment is greater when a promise is made to others. Most of all, Encore Careers represent a significant body of work—maybe involving new education and training—

that tells the world, "I'm not finished until I leave my mark on something or someone that needs my help, my experience, and my passion."

I have no doubt that the discipline of advertising and the extraordinary talent of marketers could help make the idea of Encore Careers a stunning social achievement in the first half of the 21st century. If advertising professionals help this effort by asking the right people the right questions, I believe that they will help find the starting point that can change the hearts and minds of both retirees and those who can most benefit from the work of people living out their Encore Career dreams. It is after all an inspirational vision—a vision that turns prevailing views upside down and turns the problems we face today into the opportunities of tomorrow.

It's an idea just waiting for advertising to work its magic. 

RUTH WOODEN is president of Public Agenda, a nationally and internationally recognized nonprofit research and education organization founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Prior to her appointment at Public Agenda, Ms. Wooden was executive vice president-senior counselor at the international public relations firm of Porter Novelli, where she led the advertising and cause-related marketing practice. From 1987 to 1999, she was president of The Advertising Council, the nation's leading producer of public service announcements. She presently serves as chair of the Board of Civic Ventures and is a board member of Independent Sector and Research!America.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva do JAR