

Media giant and foundation team up to fight HIV/AIDS

International campaign will use advertisements and plotlines to raise awareness

US media giant Viacom and the San Francisco-based Kaiser Family Foundation have launched one of the most ambitious HIV/AIDS media campaigns ever in which they will use the tools honed by Madison Avenue and Hollywood to fight the epidemic.

For the initiative, called KNOW HIV/AIDS, Viacom and the foundation will produce a campaign of

the campaign. These include the television networks CBS and UPN and the cable channel Showtime and Paramount television, which is one of the largest suppliers of television programming in the world. The divisions also include Infinity Radio, which is a 180-station radio network; BET (Black Entertainment Network); Comedy Central, MTV, and

messages slipped into the storylines of sitcoms, soap operas, and police dramas? If the sums of money companies are willing to spend on product placement in Hollywood productions are any indication—very effective. Consider product placement: product placement refers to the practice of taking a product and advertising it within the content of a television show or movie. To have its products used, a manufacturer may contribute free goods or services—or in many cases substantial amounts of cash—to the show. In fact, most studios and large production companies now employ full-time specialists who concentrate exclusively on product placement, either soliciting products to promote or negotiating the value of the promotion in terms of time on screen and visibility while on display.

In the Tom Hanks' film *Castaway*, for example, FedEx contributed many services and materials in return for a large showcase within the story. As the main character's employer, the FedEx logo was displayed prominently throughout the film. On a smaller level, products such as clothing, soft drinks, and more obscure items can often be promoted, with the audience absorbing the advertising subconsciously.

Stuart Birnbaum is the executive producer of the Showtime movie *The Ranch*, based on the famous Nevada prostitution compound. In the film, prostitutes are checked once a week by a physician for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Birnbaum feels this was just being responsible to the public. "We wanted to present the business as it actually is. We had the prostitutes checked because that's how business is done." But viewers watching the show will also notice that beside each prostitute's bed is a bowl full of Trojan condoms. This is no coincidence. Trojan contributed a small percentage of the film's budget in exchange for the company's product being clearly displayed on the bedside table.

Peter Graves, president of Cinemarket, a consulting firm specialising in marketing films and television shows, says inserting subtle messages into films and television shows works. "Weaving social messages into the fabric of cultural programming on a repeated basis is undoubtedly one of the best ways to get the message across", he says. "It's all about emulative behaviour. In terms of cultural shifts, it's far more effective than just a single



Billboard advertisements are used to reinforce health messages

public service announcements and print and outdoor advertising worth US\$120 million. Viacom has also issued a directive to the producers of its television shows to include storylines in their popular dramas and comedies that will raise AIDS awareness and encourage prevention, testing, and counselling.

"Clearly, ignorance is a direct contributor to the spread of the disease", says Sumner Redstone, Viacom's chief executive officer. "The disease continues to spread across the planet at alarming rates, devastating people of all genders, races, and ethnic backgrounds. Viacom and Kaiser are uniquely qualified to get the word out, and we are proud to lend our assets, voices, and resolve to help halt this epidemic."

All Viacom divisions are involved in

Nickelodeon; and Viacom Outdoor, the company's outdoor advertising division; the world's largest video rental chain Blockbuster; and publisher Simon and Schuster.

Kaiser and Viacom plan to spread their new initiative worldwide, targeting those parts of the world hardest hit by the disease. Discussions are now underway with international broadcasters, and specifics of the international phase of the initiative will be announced later this spring. "We want to use these assets, these tools, to take this message to other parts of the world where ignorance is feeding the disease", says Viacom spokesman Carl Folta. "We know we're already making an impact just based on the traffic on our website (over 1.3 million hits) and 12 000 calls to the 800 number."

But just how effective are health

created advertisement message or public service announcement, although these more direct, straightforward messages can definitely help to further underscore and focus the desired message.”

In addition to emphasising prevention and treatment, the initiative will address other social aspects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. An episode of the *Star Trek* spin-off *Enterprise* addresses the stigma that marks carriers of STDs. In the story, the starship visits a planet where an Interspecies Medical Exchange conference is taking place. At the conference, the ship’s medical officer Dr Phlox tries to obtain information about a terminal disease from the Vulcan contingent. However, he must do so without revealing that T’Pol, the *Enterprise*’s Vulcan Science Officer, has contracted the disease because the revelation would forever stigmatise her among her people. Executive Producer Brannon Braga feels using the Vulcan society as a reflection of our own “is an excellent opportunity to tackle the issue tastefully and subtly. We’re hoping to provoke the audience into thinking more carefully about issues of intolerance.”

But television is a high-speed medium: the cuts are quick, the lines brief, and the laughs fast. How long does the audience remember the joke, much less the reference to the dangers of AIDS?

Previous Kaiser Family Foundation studies have indicated the media are a top source of information for young people on sexual-health issues. According to a 1997 case study of viewers of the television programme, *ER*, even a brief mention of a sexual-health issue on a television show can have a substantial effect on the audience. In the show, a rape victim was given emergency contraception pills to prevent pregnancy. A survey of 3500 regular *ER* viewers in the week following the episode found awareness of the pill increased 17 percentage points from pre-episode levels, rising from 50% to 67%. However, a repeat survey done 10 weeks later found awareness had fallen back to 50%.

A second experiment was done in conjunction with an episode mentioning human papillomavirus to test awareness retention. Three samples of *ER* viewers were surveyed 1 week before, 1 week after, then again 5 weeks later. As before, viewers’ knowledge rose substantially, with awareness nearly doubling the week after the episode aired, from 24% to 47% of regular



Viacom

Television show *Enterprise* addressed the stigma of sexually transmitted diseases

viewers. The proportion that could correctly define human papillomavirus and were aware of its link to cervical cancer tripled. However, as with the contraception episode, the increased awareness was not sustained.

Of importance is the fact that over half of the viewers said they talked with family and friends about health issues addressed on the show and a third of viewers said information they received from watching *ER* helped them make choices about their own or their family’s health care.

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Kaiser and Viacom officials feel these case studies show that such campaigns need to be ongoing, so the messages are constantly reinforced. “Public education is never just a one-time thing”, says Matt James, spokesman for Kaiser. “By themselves, whether it’s a billboard, a public service announcement, a storyline, it’s not enough to educate the public and raise awareness. You have to come at them from multiple venues. If you don’t have all these tools, the information simply won’t stick.”

Currently, of the public service announcements produced for the campaign, six are geared to the general population, stressing that almost 1 million Americans have HIV/AIDS and one in three don’t know it; seven spots target African Americans, among whom AIDS is the number one killer at

ages 25–44, five public service announcements target people younger than 25 years, who account for half of all new HIV infections in the USA; and four spots target men who have sex with men, who account for 42% of all new HIV infections in the country.

Organisers of the initiative think television can be particularly effective way to spread this message. There is an axiom in the film and television industry that characters in films, who loom large on the big screens of the Cineplex, become larger-than-life objects of fantasy for viewers, but for a character to succeed on the television screen he or she needs to be a person the audience can relate to, identify with, someone who is just like the viewers themselves.

Phillip Noyce, director of *The Quiet American* and *Rabbit Proof Fence* notes that audiences visit the Cineplex to enter a world of fantasy and illusion, but watching television “is like staring into the bathroom mirror” where we see ourselves on a daily basis. We do not live vicariously through the lives of television characters, he says, “because we are those people”.

This closeness says Showtime producer Birnbaum allows television to deliver a message even when it is delivered subtly. When his sons “see an issue being dealt with by characters they relate to personally, they pay attention and more importantly, they talk about it. When they see these characters in pain or fear, they remember it. They’re just as smart as we are”, Birnbaum notes. “Their pants are just baggie.”

Terrell Tannen