Selling Californians on “Defensible Space” and Fire Safety

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Public safety is not often thought of as a product that needs selling. In a sense it would be true to say it is not something to sell, yet it still requires convincing a particular target audience to take action. The difference lies in the intent. Although a product would in some way benefit the user the maker (or seller) has interest in the financial gain to be made. Public safety adverts are intended to benefit the audience, there is little to gain financially for the advertiser. It is often taxpayer funded. Irrespective of the intent or who would benefit the same rhetorical appeals of logos, ethos and pathos apply.



Prestemon, Butry, Abt, and Sutphen (2010) argue that wildfire prevention awareness advertising has reduced the number of fires started by "debris burning, campfire escapes, smoking, and children" by a statistically significant number. They focused on the actions of landowners as well as government agencies in educating the public on preventing accidental fires in the state of Florida. By statistical analysis they proved that these educational programs not only prevent fires but have significant benefits in preventing economic loss. The results of this study can be used to support the efforts made by California too.

This type of advert is on some level important to everyone; hence it is posted outside stores and public spaces. On a deeper level, it is most relevant to homeowners and land lords as they stand to lose the most in the case of a wildfire. It is also more focused on the rural community that often have large yards, even adjoining farmland or wild forest. One would say as landlords and homeowners are often middleclass, the advert has middleclass appeal. It still remains relevant even to low income renters who would like to prevent loss of their personal belongings. Such fire preparation is very important to persons living within forest boundaries. Many Californians have found themselves evacuated due to wildfires unable to do anything further to protect their properties, yet those who took precautions in creating defensible space can be assured that they have made fire fighters job of saving their house that much easier and likely to succeed.

Focusing on the text of the advert, it appeals most to Lagos. The logical tick list of things to do be prepared and technical explanations as to how fires spread. The large bold line “Are you ready?” poses both the logical yes/no response and evokes the emotion of the terror of fire and the personal loss it causes. The add further appeals to emotion of not only your personal loss of property but also the lives of firefighters. This brings home the idea that it is really a life and death situation, invoking a strong emotion. The distribution of this flyer/poster by Cal-fire firefights gives it credibility. The text uses explanations to the recommended preparations using established physics of fire to further strengthen the ethos.

Visually the advert uses very striking bright colors that immediately attract attention. The color flows from the red and orange of the flames representing the threat of wildfires to the green representing the safe space you have created. Although green is the color of grass or a lawn I think the symbolism of the color here is deeper. The bright colors of the fire in contrast to the green safe space appeals to your emotions. The bright colors emulate fire, the danger coming, giving a feeling of fear. The green evokes a feeling of safety. It is used to make the target audience associate the defensible space with safety and protection. It ties in with the general notion that a “green zone” is a safe place. The black background behind the short message drives home the seriousness of the tone that this is really life and death matters.

The visuals of the advert use simple shapes giving a clear and informative picture. Effective use is made of the graphic not only to attract attention but to immediately educate and instill a clear idea what Cal-Fire means when they tell you to create safe space around your house.

The simplicity and informative nature appeals to the logic (logos) in clarifying and informing concepts visually. The simple captions and additional diagrams really drives the message home in an easy to understand format.

The general layout of the advert draws your eyes first to the burning question, “Are you ready?”. Then to the graphic and ultimately to the text. It is very effective at grabbing attention. Even if the person does not have time to read further, or interest, the graphic has already conveyed most of the message. This reminds of the adage “A picture says a thousand words”. A poorly chosen picture serves only as an attention grabber and might even become a distraction to the ultimate message. But a good picture gets half the job done in an instant. Orderly arrangement of a piece not only drives the message home but instills confidence in the credibility, appealing to Ethos.

In addition to the rhetorical appeals of emotion and reason Lutrin and Pincus (2013) identifies creativity, fact and opinion. Although fact and opining may sound like an alternative version of ethos they go deeper. Discussing the use of opinion as hard facts in a deceptive way. This is often found in political arguments to so call “Brainwash” an audience. In retail environments there is use of the “Hard sell” to convince a customer a subjective opinion is a fact. For example, “This is the strongest vacuum suction ever made”. This kind of statement is often made without any actual research proving it. An aspect of this can be seen in this advert under pointer 7; “Mow before 10 am” and “use a string trimmer”. There is some subjectivity in these statements despite them being presented as accepted convention. Wet grass might be safer to

mow but it can damage equipment and is not recommended by manufacturers. Whether or not sparks from steel blades have ever caused a major fire is also a hotly contested subject. Some are of the opinion more fires are started by faulty gasoline equipment catching fire.

The advert successfully combines the rhetorical principles of ethos, logos and pathos with creative design to reach its indented audience. With logical design it excels at transferring knowledge efficiently. Creativity grabs and hold attention without overwhelming the purpose. The advert can be viewed as very effective in its purpose to inspire action, the action of creating safety.

References

Lutrin, B., & Pincus, M. (2013). *English handbook and study guide: a comprehensive English reference book* (9th ed.). Birnam Park, South Africa: Berlut Books.

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