

Pat Dee and the Agency of Change

An Adventure in Social Marketing

by Robert Belinoff

Introduction

Not all social marketing works, and there are reasons why so much of it fails. Sometimes it fails because we simply do not have the leverage needed to change an ingrained attitude or behavior — the time, money, or energy required to overcome inertia, heredity or human chemistry.

Often it fails because public health simply doesn't know how to harness the energy or imagination of the advertising agencies, public relations firms and other message makers hired to help us market change. They are often steeped in a frenzied world of ideas and images, where time is measured in thirty-second bites. Our more analytical world is driven by meetings, consensus and caution.

These two worlds do not easily mate. And when they do come together, the product may be blessedly stillborn, or worse yet, in some way deformed. Indeed no behavior change, at least among teens — whether in the area of sex, smoking, violence or drugs — has ever been traced to a social marketing campaign.

Advertising agencies, I was convinced, had just the differential public health needed to convert planning and thinking into action and change. But I have yet to see this conversion take hold.

Certainly today's mega-conglomerate entertainment and communication empires, with their public relations, advertising, entertainment, corporate partnership and event marketing capabilities, have the media wherewithal we need to market change. Unfortunately, some of the best of these organizations shy away from our business. They leave our plump behavior-change assignments to those who have learned to work in our way and at our pace, in effect becoming unwitting partners in a process that can actually slow down the march of change, and increase the cost of trying to bring it about.

Advertising agencies do not work for free. If we walk around in circles and make them follow us through hoops, they must, they have learned, bill us for the exercise. We pay a high price when we lose their creative thinking, their ideas, passion and energy — what you really are buying when you hire an advertising agency.

There are two possible solutions to this problem. One is to reorganize our departments to more efficiently engage the most ambitious advertising agencies in such a way that they become our true partners in change. The other is for public health agencies to develop marketing departments that function like the best of these firms. This means rethinking such issues as leadership, research, risk and outsourcing, and bringing our social marketing business in-house.

For good or evil, advertising works. It provides a far better model for developing organizations capable of creating change than the biomedical model we're used to. What's more, public health can learn a great deal from advertising's corporate culture and its craft.

What would in-house social marketing look like? How would it operate? How might it accelerate change?

I have spent a decade writing about these and other ideas in professional journals only to witness a proliferation of journals, and a dearth of change. But I have always been impressed by the power of the story.

So let me tell you this one.

Pat Dee and the Agency of Change

It is a gray and wintry day a few years from now. An unanticipated and unexplainable rise in arrests in New York City has created a brutal rash of motiveless crime.

Some people attribute this surge in violence to demographics, a bubble of inner-city baby boomers born in the early 1990s, victims of a failed school system and a lack of challenging jobs. But most attribute it to a new, cheap and potent drug called Skotch.

Skotch is an inorganic chemical that induces the dreaminess of LSD and the rush of crack. Apparently, it is easy to produce the drug at home with the help of a friendly pharmacist. You smoke it. You float and come down hard, and want more right away. People coming down, it is said, don't know their own strength. As a result, many people have died at their own hand, and many more at someone else's.

Crime and suicide are up, primarily in a square mile area of upper Manhattan and in certain pockets of New Jersey and Miami. If Skotch follows the pattern of similar drugs, it will emerge in about a month in such cities as Topeka, Dubuque, Albuquerque and Austin. We would then see it on college campuses everywhere. In a year it will have become another one of those nationwide behavioral epidemics costing billions of dollars and taking hundreds of lives a month.

The responsibility for addressing the problem in its infancy in New York City has fallen to the Health Department's Agency of Change.

The Agency of Change is committed to developing and implementing short- and long-range social marketing programs designed to decrease the social acceptability of dangerous behaviors, such as drug abuse, teen sex, drinking while driving or teen pregnancy.

Dozens of similar agencies have sprung up in cities large and small across America. All these agencies sprang from a pilot proposal drafted a decade earlier by a young Manhattan Borough police department sergeant, Pat Dee. A credible and engaging 26-year-old woman at the time, Pat Dee was known for having her facts straight, a fire in her smile, and to put it simply, taking chances. She was also the right person at the right time.

A few years before Pat came to the police department, federal block grants had been issued that allowed state and local governments the freedom and flexibility to produce innovative, even untested programs tailor-made for the problem at hand.

As a result of this new system, Pat had been given a modest internal grant and six months to demonstrate her experimental approach to reducing the city's never-ending graffiti problem. She was successful beyond anyone's expectations. Under her focused and fiery direction, the programs she developed linked schools with the police department, as well as radio and television stations, half a dozen community web sites, local arts group, and representatives of the broadcast media. Together, these groups developed a quick action alliance known by insiders as XPresto.

Among its other accomplishments, Presto was credited with having made malicious petty acts of art unpopular and turned some of the city's more talented graffiti criminals into recognized artists. Citywide, their products became acknowledged as works of wall-size art. As a result, street-front art programs were rivaling pick-up basketball games in some parts of town. And bodegas started stocking art supplies.

Within short order, Presto had replaced many activities usually reserved for the police, the courts, and the Neighborhood Watch. The mayor, once again reinventing his administration, put Pat Dee in charge of her own idea—the newly created Agency of Change.

The agency immediately began to attract national attention. And other cities created their own agencies based on Pat's model. More importantly, the agency gained wide support within the ranks of state and city government, and substantial influence and respect in the New York business community.

The small but dedicated Agency of Change staff was based on two floors high up in the old Cotton Exchange Building in Lower Manhattan. From her office on the twenty-first floor, Pat could look over the Statue of Liberty to the New Jersey shore and the rest of America beyond.

Pat Dee sits there now alone, deep in thought. It is quiet. It is 6 a.m.; the sky is a cold pale blue over New York harbor. Pat's calendar for the next two weeks is full; among other items on her list, she must give her final OK on a monthly online teen magazine, oversee the impending launch of a four-year prenatal care awareness initiative, hire a new writer, and bring together hundreds of guests and 101 details of her husband Herb's surprise birthday party that Friday night—an occasion for which she has rented out Block Party, an adult community playground. Herb had always been less than enthusiastic about his birthday. Pat hoped to change that.

But now Skotch has entered her life and changed her calendar. Suddenly she has five days to go—from doing the research, to developing an action plan, to making a marketing presentation to the Mayor to combat the spread of a drug she knows next to nothing about.

Before Skotch struck, Pat's obsession had been prenatal care. Her goal had been to reduce the rate of low birthweight babies by 20 percent in two years, by 50 percent in four years. She had developed a short- and long-range plan to help her reach those goals. She called the first her XToday Plan, and the second her XTomorrow Plan.

Her Tomorrow Plan, the long-range strategy, had been Pat's greatest challenge, for it involved helping women to understand and love their bodies. According to her plan, the educational process was to begin in second grade with the introduction of Sexuality as a part of Kiddie Gym, where students were naturally thinking about their bodies. In upper elementary grades, gym class was to become a combination sports, nutrition and sociology class. Students would learn how to use their body to its full potential, to respect it and keep it in top working

condition. They learned what to eat, what not to eat and why.

With seventh grade came 'The Talks,' weekly two-hour labs, in which boys and girls would talk in an organized way about what was happening with their bodies, in their lives, at home and among friends.

To sell the politically sensitive program, Pat talked to parents and teachers who had finally come to learn the high cost of denying healthy sexuality. Of the 57 schools she had targeted, 41 had signed on to something that never could have happened in the old days when most school boards firmly opposed the introduction of new ideas, leadership and change. Having sold the curriculum school by school and contentious audience by contentious audience, Pat had become its hero, its savior. She took one last look at her Tomorrow Plan prenatal file, made a mental note of her progress, and double-clicked it into cyberspace. Prenatal awareness will have to wait.

Opening her e-mail, Pat sends her staff a memo about a media campaign she has already dubbed 'Skotch No.' She outlines the mayor's charge to her and asks her staff to meet her in the conference room in an hour.

Pat has three assistants and an executive staff of 12. Among them are small cadres of crazed ad types: two writers, two media purchasing directors, a team of web-site engineers and an art director. The art director is a Dutchman named Hans Ahn.

Hans lives and breathes for ideas. As a professional, he does whatever he has to do, but what fascinates him most is the way pictures work with words to create a third entity.

Hans and Pat have worked together for nine years. Whereas she made lists, placed calls, met with people, and was always tap dancing up tempo in a straight line, Hans was different. There was no method to his madness; he just made stuff up out of thin air. He usually started with an end he liked and then figured out how to get there. She was left brain, he was right, and together they produced a third entity: the Agency of Change, a little get-it-done idea machine.

Hans's forte was origami to making objects out of paper, a craft that ran against the grain of technology's onslaught, and a talent he applied to seemingly frivolous promotional items emblazoned with health messages. He made toy hot-air balloons out of paper, cutout dolls, a brochure disguised as a paper airplane. Once, he created fortune cookie messages about the nutritional benefits of apricots; that month apricot sales statewide shot up 27 percent.

Hans also supervised the monthly production of an e-mail teen magazine. The E-Ines as it was called, was assembled by nine remarkable 15-year-olds in a family basement in Brooklyn. The teens ran this after-school business pretty much on their own during their one-year contract with the Agency of Change. Once out, the e-mail magazine fell on receptive eyes. It was marketed on radio and on the school web-site. Because computers with modems weighed six ounces, cost less than a toaster, and were as thin as a sheet of paper, everyone had one. Hans himself had a regular column on the E-Ines with links to his web-site, where he demonstrated the all-but-lost art of making things out of paper.

Also on Pat's executive team is a woman named Ethel, who does nothing but think and look things up. She has three padded chairs in her office for sitting and thinking, and one computer station. Known throughout the agency as 'Ethel the Thinker,' she has virtually all the healthcare information in the world at her fingertips. But more important than that is her database of local statistics and health indicators to realms of information out of which she distills certain assumptions based on certain facts.

Although Ethel keeps largely to herself, she cuts quite a figure with her white hair, white shirts and colorful ties.

Her job is to help Pat Dee and others make informed decisions, a task she performs by preparing a three-page position paper usually within 48 hours of its request. The last such request had been for information on tuberculosis infection patterns in three Lower East Side zip code regions, data required by the local American Lung Association, for a neighborhood media blitz.

The busiest place in the agency is PM, Processing and Manifestation. This office is a combination warehouse, mailroom and image processing pool. Behind the swinging doors of PM are a bank of image processors; four computers; several photo, type and duplication adapters; an e-mail traffic manager; and three 14-year-olds who serve as after-school gofers and messengers. Two of these students want to go into public health, and the third, named Sly, used to help produce the teen magazine in the Brooklyn basement. Sly helped lay out the magazine on the computer, but he really wanted to be a writer. These three young messengers will be attending the upcoming staff meeting. If the meeting goes as well as the others have, Pat thinks to herself, they may well make the most valuable contributions concerning the Skotch problem and how to solve it.

For now, Pat is launching her own orderly attack on the problem. She takes from her credenza a big blank spiral notebook. On the first page she writes, XSkotch NoE using a thick, black felt-tip pen. On the page opposite, she pastes a copy of her XSkotch NoE do list along with the memo from the Mayor requesting a presentation on Friday. By then, she will have a scrapbook of her thoughts, a collection of facts and tidbits, photos, memos, and news clips off the Net. In all, a 20- or 30-page hard copy document she will call the Skotch No Planning Gram.

Starting at the top of her list, she schedules a meeting with Fife Tortuni, head of the midsize ad agency that helps with hard drug de-marketing assignments. She then calls Ned Hirsch, director of program development at ABC/Nike Television. She has been working with them, Kellogg's, and the National Football League (NFL) over the past year on behalf of her prenatal awareness initiative. This public-private consortium has developed a situation comedy series about mothers and daughters; they have size programs in the can and two story lines still in development. ABC/Nike, Kellogg's, and the NFL had each been given a tax incentive to invest in the new television series. The legislation allowing for this arrangement had been passed by Congress two years earlier, sneaking through as a rider to a bill offering tax incentives to industrial manufacturing companies that install aluminum-nickel air scrubbers to reduce chemical emissions. Like other incentives to clean up the environment, the social marketing media tax incentive would provide considerable tax breaks to the publicly held companies involved in Pat's plan. She asks Ned to look into a possible plot line about Skotch for the two prenatal scripts still in development.

Her next call is to her friend at NORA, Inc., one of a handful of firms in the city involved in near overnight research and analysis. The activity from which the company derived its name. Pat tells them that by Thursday she needs to have some idea about why there's been a sudden increase in Skotch use, where the drug is coming from, and how its use might be most effectively combated. At ten o'clock, Pat, Hans, Ethel, and other members of the team assemble in the Base Room for a rundown on the Skotch assignment. The Base Room, distinctive for its elbow-high, counter-like conference table devoid of chairs, derives its name from its function; staffers meet there to quickly touch base on various projects.

Hans, having never become accustomed to the short stand-up meetings favored by Pat Dee, has his own director's high chair that he pulls up to the tall, narrow countertop table. Sitting down, he slips to a sheet on his yellow pad and immediately begins touching up the XSkotch NoE logo he had been doodling that morning. Others gather around shoulder to shoulder, propping themselves up on elbows, as Pat tells the group what's in store. She runs down her XdoE list with them, and explains what she's done so far.

Those who know anything about Skotch tell what they know. As predicted, Sly, the young messenger, gives

a long firsthand account of his experience with the drug. It turns out that his brother has been making it with friends in a neighbor's kitchen sink.

Next Pat opens up the meeting to potential communication themes and vehicles. Without sufficient information at hand, Pat knows the team will be unable to make decisions or assignments, but she wants to get the juices flowing nonetheless. All suggestions, both standard and outrageous, are noted down, including Sly's offer to try a XSkotch No comic-book script. Sly has an idea for a plunky cartoon character named Zero, who is always walking around in circles. Sly thinks he could write a XSkotch No story about him, and offers to try out the idea on his buddies as a type of formative research and make adjustments based on their feedback.

XGo for it, Hans says. XGone, Sly replies, and the amazement of all assembled, he bolts from the table and marches out the Base Room's double doors.

XStick around, Pat says to the rest of the participants. XOne thing for sure, she goes on, XI want to develop an All-Media Infoinsert, and we can start right away. The AMI is a CD ROM package that conveys in capsule form, anecdote, photographs and hard facts, everything already known about Skotch.

The Infoinsert will be made available to all electronic, broadcast and print media as well as to teachers and concerned community leaders. But it will be specifically designed for the Internet, where its presence will be extensively promoted and advertised to parents. Pat knows this will work, for the Internet has now become a form of mass media accessible to most people regardless of income, ethnicity, or education level. Computers are in 99 percent of households nationwide, and nearly everyone under the age of 35 is computer literate. In short, computers as vehicles for information and entertainment are as pervasive now as radio and television were a generation before.

Ironically, the computers and the Internet have given new life to one of the earliest communication technologies, word of mouth. Personalized computer technology delivers information to individuals in an informal, haphazard fashion that is so accessible, it has become an adjunct to street corners, where gossip is the entertainment of choice. Insiders have even named the buzz set off by gossip on the Internet Wom, for World-of-Mouth.

Pat says she wants the Infoinsert tested and ready to roll in two weeks. XDon't know what exactly, Hans interjects, Xbut here's a start. He holds up a billboard idea he's been working on.

XGreat, Pat says, Xbut the words are all wrong. Put a writer on it if we have one to spare. XWe don't, Hans says as they all prepare to leave, Xbut I'll see if I can slow Sly down long enough for him to give it a shot.

XI'll know more when NORA delivers its research goodies tomorrow afternoon, Pat tells them as they adjourn. She walks with Hans back to his office, and then plops into the padded New England rocker opposite his station, as Hans brushes back his unruly mop of hair. Together, they kick around potential strategies, opportunities and problems.

XI like this, Pat says, pointing to Hans's logo. XDo it up tighter and we'll check it out with Sly and his gang for XCR. By XCR Pat is referring to Cultural Relevance. As society has become more homogeneous, this elaborate testing for message suitability which was really more about politics and community organizing any way has become a shadow of its former self.

Finally, Pat asks Hans to keep her husband Herb occupied Friday evening and, at the anointed hour, to escort him to the surprise party he has been hoping to avoid since they were married 14 years ago. Hans tells Pat she can count on him.

When it comes time for the XSkotch NoE campaign, the media is also on Pat's side. Three years earlier in a landmark ruling foreshadowed by the fall of the tobacco industry in America, television was ruled in certain instances a Xviolence delivery vehicle.E The ruling came when a leaked, and now infamous memo, revealed a conspiracy between programmers and program developers to cater to the special vulnerabilities of children and adolescents. The ensuing public outcry resulted in a change in policy, which was eventually followed by a change in the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of television executives who now welcomed the opportunity to be of assistance.

Pat and Hans agree to get their cable and broadcasting allies immediately involved in message creation. Hans will put together communication themes, positioning statements, headlines, and copy points. XI've got a meeting with Fife Tortuni tomorrow morning,E Pat says. XI'll ask Fife, as a part of his agency contract with us, to work with high school media classes to develop PSAs for the Internet, and in-school television.E

The next morning, after their meeting, Pat asks Fife if he has any good writers he can part with. When he says he doesn't, she makes sure Fife and his wife will be coming to her husband's party Friday night. Juggling her professional and personal life is no problem for Pat as the two lives draw on the same well of energy and heart, and she loves them both.

Early that afternoon, Pat has a call placed to her friend Rosco, a 24-year-old youth counselor who works with gangs. She tells him about the Skotch campaign and they arrange to meet for lunch at the coffee shop downstairs, on the first floor of the Cotton Exchange Building. Over a tuna fish sandwich, Pat asks Rosco about a human-interest story she saw on the morning's community Web site newspaper. Evidently a gang of local graffiti artists recently arrested while practicing their craft have been sentenced to time in service to the neighborhood. Pat wants Rosco to see if they have any artistic ideas for combating Skotch. He agrees to check it out and get back to her before the end of the week. XCome by Friday night,E Pat says, handing him an invitation to the party. XBring a friend or two.E

On her jog that Thursday night before her XSkotch NoE marketing presentation to the Mayor, Pat reviews the wheels she has set in motion:

- * A three-minute, two-page research presentation will define the problem and outline a rationale for their strategy. Pat's initial instincts have been born out by NORA, Inc., and Ethel the Thinker. The strategy they've developed is based on information that is hard and fast, making the campaign more like a drug-tampering announcement than a long-term prenatal strategy.

- * An Infoinsert is under production. The six-minute presentation will define the problem in simple words and pictures, tell what the drug does to the body, and describe how to spot and confront the problem in a family as well as in a neighborhood. It also gives a series of phone numbers to call for help or more information. It will take a month to produce.

- * ABC/Nike and other corporate sponsors have agreed to introduce a Skotch addict character into their Mothers and Daughters soap opera series.

- * Fife Tortuni has already asked one of his people to schedule a meeting with the media department heads in each of nine high schools. If they agree to participate, they will have their students interview one another on the subject of Skotch. These filmed interviews will then be edited into a series of one-minute infomercials for each facility's in-school television transmission as well as for the Internet.

- * Rosco may be able to arrange for the arrested graffiti artists to serve their penance by commemorating three recent neighborhood Skotch deaths with three wall-size murals facing Gazebo park, one block from the home

of the youths. Rosco has also suggested that Doggy Doo, a local skittle rock group, perform a skittle rap on Skotch. Consideration is being given to a XSkotch NoE concert in the park using the three wall murals as a backdrop. ABC/Nike has agreed to tape the event; if they get good enough footage with the right sound bites, they may be able to edit it down into a 30-minute video. This, Fife Tortuni says, can be made available to Hollywood as a bonus second feature to be tagged onto videos that will appeal to teens.

* Wom, the word-of-mouth marketing machine, is already chattering. And Hans has talked to his friend, an advertising director at Torque, a hot new skateboard manufacturer. Torque is open to discussion about tying a XSkotch NoE theme into their new ad campaign, the slogan of which is XYes, Yes, Yes.E

* Hans will take Sly's rough ideas for the comic book and begin to whittle it down into scenes. Meanwhile, he has finished his prototype XSkotch NoE logo, a nasty-looking skull and lightning bolt, and is now considering washable tattoos as one venue for getting materials, items, promotional XstuffE out to the street where communities could customize it, create with it, make it their own.

Will any of these activities make a difference? Alone, probably not, Pat mused. But all together these are particles that over time can form a wave that would move over the problem leaving it somehow changed & withered hopefully, and eventually drained.

Just paying attention to a problem with focus, energy and imagination, it was now recognized, has a definite though impossible-to-measure effect, much the same as her jogging influences her mind. Electricity created through simple acts of XdoingE restores a chemical balance to the body & personal as well as social.

The generative activity, Pat knew, would occur out in the community, not in the conference room, not through the planning documents, or research papers.

Only a small portion of dollars was allotted to evaluation. There were too many variables, an infinite number of ways of slicing and dicing to ever nail down the exact recipe for the social marketing stew. The money saved would be invested in pilots, experiments and occasional risky-yet-creative social marketing ventures. Pat suspects that the presentation to the mayor will go well, as indeed it does. The Mayor blesses the project and the agency is off and running.

That night her husband Herb is not the only one to be surprised. Rosco, it turns out, has invited 50 of his closest friends to Block Party, along with Doggy Doo, the skittle rock group. The gala event becomes known as the party of the year ... the birthday Herb would never forget. At one point Pat announces that Sly will be the agency's new writer. Later, as the evening winds down, she settles down with her husband.

XI never though I could learn to like my birthday, let alone a party,E Herb tells Pat. Pat gives her husband a smile, a kiss and raises her glass to toast.

XIf nothing changes,E she says, Xnothing changes.E

Your comments are welcome. Contact Bob Belinoff,
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