

# The Use of Positive Versus Negative Appeals for Foster Care Advertisements

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## Abstract

The use of negative advertising appeals – which aim to induce action by arousing negative emotions in the viewing audience at the thought of inaction – in social marketing is controversial. Some conclude that inducing negative appeals increase advertisement persuasiveness; however others recommend against using negative appeals to affect behavioural change. We investigate this issue from the perspective of foster care with an empirical study of 566 Australians. Findings indicate that the negative advertisement lead to lower ad likability and intention to act. No differences were found with respect to message take-out from the negative appeal, other than a lowered belief that fostering would be an enjoyable thing to do. Results suggest that negative advertisements are less effective in the context of foster care, supporting prior criticisms of negative advertising for social marketing more generally.

**Keywords:** foster care, advertising, negative appeals

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## **Introduction**

In Australia there are currently over 34,000 children in out-of-home care, a figure that has doubled in the past ten years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010). The largest proportion of these children are in foster care. However in the same period the number of people willing to become foster carers has dramatically decreased (Wooldridge, 2009). In order to provide stable and nurturing homes to those within our community who are most vulnerable, foster care agencies are faced with the challenge of developing marketing and communications strategies which have the ability to attract more foster carers.

Until this point, foster care agencies have employed people with the social work skills required to implement children's welfare services, not people with marketing expertise. The marketing function is usually performed by a social worker with little knowledge of sophisticated marketing strategies and a virtually non-existent budget. Compounding this issue, there has been very little research done in the area of foster care marketing which might give direction to practitioners as to the strategies which would work best for them, and the extent to which commercial advertising techniques are applicable for the socially sensitive topic of foster care.

We aim to fill this gap by testing the effectiveness of two different advertisements for foster care, and identifying whether the use of negative appeals – a common and often successful social marketing strategy which aims to induce action because the viewer wants to rectify a situation they have negative feelings about – is an effective strategy in the case of foster care advertising.

## **Literature Review**

The study of the effectiveness of negative appeals in advertisements has a history of 60 years. Yet the issue of whether negative campaigns should be used in social marketing remains controversial. Scientific evidence on the effectiveness of negative appeals is contradictory.

One of the first studies into the effectiveness of negative appeals, or in this case fear appeals, in social marketing (Janis and Feshbach, 1953) investigated students' reactions to low, moderate and high fear appeal advertisements relating to oral hygiene. While respondents were found to take in the same amount of information under all conditions, compliance with the recommended behaviour was found to be the highest under the less negative condition. In their more recent meta-analysis of 98 studies, Witte and Allen (2000) come to the opposite conclusion: the more negative the message communicated through an advertising execution, the more persuasive the ad. This finding is consistent with that of a number of other meta-analyses on the same topic (Boster and Mongeau, 1984; Mongeau, 1998).

The scientific evidence, therefore, has not dampened debate over whether negative campaigns should be used in the context of social marketing. Proponents argue its efficiency. For example, Hill, Chapman and Donovan's (1998) report on the effectiveness of a very

confrontational anti-tobacco campaign in Australia reported that it reached 95% of the target population and led to discussion about smoking and increased quitting activity. Opponents question the validity of prior findings and warn about the lack of understanding of long-term effects and unknown side-effects. For example, Hastings, Stead and Webb (2004) acknowledge that a large number of studies in the past have come to the conclusion that negative campaigns are effective, however they warn that our cumulative knowledge about the effects of negative ads - knowledge derived from laboratory experiments - focuses only on short-term effects and does not provide any insight into the reactions of people who are not forced to view these messages. In addition, they are critical of the fact that possible unintended effects of negative appeals have not been studied to date.

In the case of foster care, the social marketing challenge is to convince people to make, and follow through with, the decision to become a foster carer. However, based on the literature summarised above, there is no clear direction for foster care agencies regarding whether or not their advertising efforts would be more effective with the inclusion of negative appeals. To this point, the impact of negative appeals has been tested for other social behaviours, mostly health related, but not for the socially sensitive issue of foster care. Advertising campaigns have, until now, usually been based on the agency's "best guess" as to the text and images advertising executions should include, without scientific evidence to inform their development. It is this gap in knowledge which we seek to address with this study.

## **Empirical Study**

### **Methodology**

Data was collected in November-December 2009 by conducting an online self-completion survey with Australian citizens and permanent residents aged between 18-64 years who had not been foster carers before. A national sample of 566 individuals was recruited through an online research panel and quotas were used to ensure representativeness of the Australian adult population for age, sex and state of residence.

### **Stimulus**

Two print advertisements developed by local foster care organisation, CareSouth, were used as stimulus executions for this study and are shown in Figure 1. The first execution (E1) acted as the positive stimulus for this study and depicts a foster carer and foster child working happily in the garden together. The image presents the fostering experience as enjoyable and rewarding, and the text reinforces the positive difference carers can make on the long-term future of foster children.

The second execution (E2) is the negative stimulus and shows a teenage girl sitting on a cold hard floor with her head in her hands, creating an image of despair and desperation. The text emphasises the difficulty disadvantaged children face in tough times, and implies that carers can save them from this reality.

**Figure 1: Advertising Stimulus**



## Measures

For each execution, participants were asked to look at and read the advertisement and then click a button to proceed to the questions. To ensure the least biasing order of measures for the print ads (Rossiter and Percy, 1997), ad liking was measured first, intention to act second, and brand beliefs last.

*Ad Liking.* Participants firstly indicated how much they liked the picture in the ad using a five-point scale with the points labelled “I disliked it very much”, “I disliked it”, “I neither liked it nor disliked it”, “I liked it”, and “I liked it very much”. They then indicated how much they liked the text just underneath the picture. For these two questions the aspect of the ad being rated was highlighted and the rest of the ad faded out, to ensure that they were rating the correct component of the execution. Participants then rated their overall feeling towards the ad using the same scale.

*Intention to act.* Participants were asked “If you saw this advertisement on a billboard, what are the chances it would motivate you to call the organisation to enquire about becoming a foster carer?” Ratings were given using an 11-point Juster scale (Juster, 1966) ranging from 0 = “no chance, almost no chance (1 in 100)” to 10 = “certain, practically certain (99 in 100)”.

*Brand beliefs.* Participants were asked how much they believed different statements about foster care. These statements were derived following consultation with CareSouth regarding the key intended messages of the ads: E1 was trying to communicate that “even staying just a short time with a foster carer can make a big difference to a child in the long-term” and “foster care is an enjoyable thing to do”. E2 was trying to convey that “foster carers give disadvantaged kids a chance in life they might never have had otherwise” and “foster carers do an important job”. Participants indicated their level of belief in these four statements using a seven point scale ranging from “to a very small extent” to “to a very large extent”.

## Analysis and Results

### Ad Liking

The five point rating scales used to measure ad liking were given numerical values in order to calculate average scores, ranging from 1 = “disliked it very much” to 5 = “liked it very much”. Paired samples t-tests were conducted to identify whether any one execution was liked significantly more by participants than the other in terms of its picture, text and overall.

The results of these t-tests are shown in Table 1. In terms of the picture, E1 (M=4.00, SD=.645) received significantly higher ratings than E2 (M=3.20, SD=.875);  $t(565)=17.901$ ,  $p=.000$ . Similarly for the text, E1 (M=4.01, SD=.693) was liked significantly more than E2 (M=3.57, SD=.891);  $t(565)=10.254$ ,  $p=.000$ . Finally, for the overall liking of the ad, E1 (M=4.02, SD=.645) was liked significantly more than E2 (M=3.43, SD=.846);  $t(565)=14.224$ ,  $p=.000$ .

**Table 1: Paired samples t-test results comparing liking of E1 and E2.**

	Execution 1 (E1)		Execution 2 (E2)		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Picture	4.00	.645	3.20	.875	17.901	565	.000
Text	4.01	.693	3.57	.891	10.254	565	.000
Overall	4.02	.645	3.43	.846	14.224	565	.000

### Intention to Act

A paired samples t-test was again used to compare whether one ad was more likely to prompt individuals to take action by contacting the foster care agency to enquire about becoming a foster carer. Average intention values for each execution were calculated using participants' ratings on the 11-point Juster scale. E1 (M=3.46, SD=2.656) was significantly more likely to prompt action than E2 (M=3.15, SD=2.671);  $t(565)=4.432$ ,  $p=.000$ .

### Brand Beliefs

The order that advertisements were shown to participants was randomised so that approximately half of the sample saw E1 first and the other half saw E2 first. This was done to ensure that we could measure the brand beliefs for each execution at a point where the respondents had not seen any other executions previously, therefore avoiding beliefs which had been contaminated by exposure to previous foster care ads. The brand belief scores presented in Table 2 are those of that portion of the sample which saw each execution first.

Independent samples t-tests were performed to compare the brand beliefs of the group exposed to E1 and the group exposed to E2. As can be seen in Table 2, there were no significant differences in the extent to which each group believed statements 1, 3 and 4. The groups did differ significantly, however, in the extent to which they believed that being a foster carer would be enjoyable, with the group exposed to E1 (M=5.11, SD=1.447) believing

this statement more than the group exposed to E2 ( $M=4.76$ ,  $SD=1.426$ ),  $t(564)=2.936$ ,  $p=.003$ .

**Table 2: Independent samples t-tests comparing brand beliefs after exposure to E1 and E2.**

	Execution 1 (E1)		Execution 2 (E2)		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
1. Even staying just a short time with a foster carer can make a big difference to a child in the long-term	5.66	1.335	5.50	1.362	1.393	564	.164
2. Foster care is an enjoyable thing to do	5.11	1.447	4.76	1.426	2.936	564	.003
3. Foster carers give disadvantaged kids a chance in life they might never have had otherwise	5.95	1.225	5.97	1.185	-.115	564	.877
4. Foster carers do an important job	6.23	1.151	6.30	1.127	-.682	564	.495

## Conclusions

Despite 60 years of research on the effects of negative advertisements, clear recommendations for organisations who offer social services, including foster care, are not available. Some experts believe that negative campaigns should be used because there is overwhelming evidence for their effectiveness; while others question the evidence for methodological reasons (derived mainly from laboratory experiments) and warn about unintended consequences of airing advertisements that attempt to induce negative emotions in the audience.

As a consequence, this study investigated the effectiveness of two very different ads in the context of foster care marketing, both with the aim of attracting foster carers. An empirical study was conducted among the Australian population who had had no previous experience with foster caring. Results indicate that the positive advertisement (E1) was liked significantly more by the audience and also led to a higher stated intention to act, specifically in the form of contacting a foster care organisation to enquire about becoming a foster carer. With respect to beliefs about foster care, for three of the four belief statements there was no difference found in the extent of belief between the groups exposed to E1 and E2. The only difference found was that the negative appeal (E2) elicited a low level of belief that foster caring would be an enjoyable thing to do, an outcome which is hardly conducive to an effective recruitment campaign.

These results are consistent with the original findings of Janis and Feshbach (1953), namely, that the extent of information transfer (in this case in the form of beliefs about the brand) is not significantly affected by the level of induced negative emotion. In addition, more positive ads which do not induce negative emotions such as fear or worry are more effective in leading to the intended behaviour, thus supporting the warnings by Hastings et al. (2004) about the use of negative campaigns for the purposes of social marketing.

It should be noted that a limitation of this study is the age difference of the two children in the ads. The child in the negative appeal is older and might prompt viewers to draw other associations such as the likelihood of more complex issues and challenging behaviour that are often associated more with adolescents than young children.

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