TIME TO FACE UP TO REALITY

In anti-smoking campaign's case, nothing gets message across better than that face

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WHEN an artist or photographer creates a portrait, he or she goes beyond the appearance of the person, suggesting intuitive information about the personality and social standing of the subject, as well as time and place.

The photographer Richard Avedon attributes this insight partly to the hand of the photographer and partly to the image projected by the subject. As a non-photographer who has never had the privilege of being the subject of a great photographer, I can attest to the fact that, to some extent, the photographer and partly to the image invariably goes beyond the appearance of the subject of a great photographer.

All this brings me to the recent furor and multi-decade debate over the Health Promotion Board (HPB) poster and 70-second television spot depicting the ravages of oropharyngeal cancer.

People say they object to the image because disgusting and fear should not be used as motivation to change behaviour.

But if not fear, then to what emotion should appeal be made?

Will organic moral suasion work? ("Don't smoke: as a member of society, keep the air clean for others.") Should a reward be offered for dropping the habit? ("Free chewing gum if you've only tossed the butt.")

Others say such distressing images may give children nightmares, so the HPB is not alone in thinking it is wrong to use horror images in the objections to the poster and the television message because the poster is more frightening than the television message because it shows a silent open mouth, a soundless plea for mercy - for a divine cure, a humane acceptance.

It is impossible to substitute some other poster for this message. Would a celebrity's inspirational declaration of having kicked the habit be adequate when we know that giving up nicotine is harder than learning Mandarin, losing weight and volunteering at charitable institutions?

Is the message and the picture are evocation of the collapse of one's sheltered and safe universe; this is the very reason we want to turn away. The single face underlines the loneliness of suffering and the fearlessness of ominous death. The poster is more frightening than the television message because it shows a silent open mouth, a soundless plea for mercy - for a divine cure, a humane acceptance.

There is no rational reason to reject the campaign. If anything, our very cringing underscores the effectiveness of the images.

In each case, a fresh configuration and innovative wisdom needs to be applied. The mood and sensibilities of every target audience must be assessed anew and an appropriate, more effective, method used each time - regardless of the crises from conventional wisdom and political correctness, or been from the sidelines. If objective instruments such as data fundamentals, market research and focus group studies show it is time to go with sentimentality (as pro-family messages do) or guilt (as antidrug messages do) or a sense of duty (as army recruitment messages do), that is the method to use. And if straight talking is called for, the HPB should go for it.

Really, as always, let the market decide.

*Note: Munch produced several versions of The Scream and also translated the picture into a lithograph so that the image could be reproduced all over the world.

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