

Counterpoint

The Philanthropist welcomes and, if appropriate, will publish responses to any of its articles or features.

A Response to “Stigmatizing the Disabled Through Fund-Raising Appeals”

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After reading the article “Stigmatizing the Disabled Through Fund-Raising Appeals” in the Spring ‘86 issue of *The Philanthropist*, I feel I must respond to Mr. Toole’s discussion of coping/succumbing images as it relates to an Ontario March of Dimes’ advertisement, our “Ropes” campaign.

We couldn’t agree more with Mr. Toole’s premise that a positive, able and equal view of people with disabilities should be portrayed in fund-raising appeals, however I must object to his statement that we have disregarded this premise in the campaign in question.

For the benefit of those who have not seen it, the “Ropes” advertisement shows a non-disabled man struggling to free himself from ropes that bind him to his chair. The voice-over (in the televised version) carries the message:

Imagine, not being able to move. A muscle. For the rest of your life. Now, how much would you give? To lift an arm? Move a leg? Take a step? . . . At the Ontario March of Dimes, we’re giving everything we’ve got to develop the ability in disabled adults. We’re helping with artificial limbs, wheelchairs, job training in fields as advanced as computer technology. So those who are disabled can play a useful role in the society they so badly want to be a part of. But we need your help. Think about it for a moment . . . Help us break the bonds of disability. Give as generously as you are able.

The objective of this advertisement is not, as Mr. Toole states, to depict the “dire consequences of spinal cord injury” (in fact there is no mention of any particular type of disability at all—the Ontario March of Dimes serves people with any form of physical disability). The picture is not that of a person who is disabled, but clearly of a non-disabled person who is experiencing disability.

The goal of the advertisement is to create visually a means by which an able-bodied person can experience for a few moments the barriers which a disabled individual faces. The message is directed towards people who have no experience

of disability, but might be more understanding if they could see themselves in a situation faced by some disabled people.

Mr. Toole states that “succumbing” appeals emphasize the difference between disabled and non-disabled persons. Our advertisement does exactly the opposite. It conveys the message that a disabled person is exactly the same as the person the viewer sees; the only difference between disabled and non-disabled people is physical barriers.

Does our image highlight a lack of ability? Not at all. The message is clear: “To develop the ability in disabled adults.”

Are we spreading an attitude of hopelessness? The person in the advertisement is certainly frustrated, however, the message is an optimistic one: “We’re giving everything we’ve got to develop the ability in disabled adults . . . So those who are disabled can play a useful role in society . . .”

As to the impact of this type of “empathy” appeal, we agree that further testing and research would be of great assistance. However, we have received positive response from both the disabled and non-disabled communities. The advertisement has received numerous awards from the marketing and advertising industry *and*, most significantly, an award judged by TV viewers.¹ This advertisement is an award winner because of its stark realism, impact and approach to the able-bodied community. It does not stigmatize disabled people—it does make the able-bodied viewer *think*.

Jocelyn Lovell, herself disabled, and a well-known advocate for disabled people, supports our view. She writes: “‘Ropes’ illustrates just how I feel . . . I don’t like being paralyzed in a wheelchair and that’s no secret. I’m doing my best to try and raise funds and awareness for an eventual cure. I believe that your ‘Ropes’ poster and TV commercial will maybe make my goal a little easier.”

The Ontario March of Dimes believes strongly that physically disabled individuals are not different from the rest of the population. We all cast different shadows but we feel, and need, and give our talents in the same way.

FOOTNOTE

1. “Ropes” has earned the following awards:

Marketing Awards 85 Gold Award. Andy Rogers Memorial Award for Public Service (top advertising award in Canada for non-profit organizations).

Hollywood Radio and Television Society. International Broadcasting Award, the World’s Best Broadcast Advertisement of 1984 (public service category, radio).

The Bessies. Second place in public service/charity category for Canadian television commercials (1985).

New York International Radio Festival. Honourable mention for radio public service/charity category (1985).

New York Art Directors Club. Honourable mention for TV commercial and print advertisement (1985).

“Art Direction” Magazine. Certificate of Distinction for creativity (1985).

TVBs Retail Comp Award—The Teles. First place in public service category (1985) (judged by consumers).