

## THE CONVERSATION

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# Charity campaigns may cause outrage, but shock sells

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We can't always see no evil. Alicakes

A campaign for Pancreatic Cancer Action recently stirred up controversy over advertising “shock tactics”. In the advert, genuine sufferers of the disease stated to camera that “I wish I had testicular cancer” or “I wish I had breast cancer”. The implication was that those afflictions were preferable to the particularly deadly pancreatic form.

Twitter was particularly aghast at the inference that one type of cancer was desirable to another and the Daily Mail duly printed the sentiments expressed online. The campaign was “offensive, repugnant and hurtful to all cancer victims and their families” as well as being “insensitive to those with breast cancer and who have lost loved ones to it”.

Other charities were equally incensed. Chris Askew, CEO of Breakthrough Breast Cancer, said: “We strongly dispute any message which suggests that one type of cancer is preferable to another.”

Now, the death of Kerry Harvey, one of the faces of the campaign, has reawakened the debate. Was Pancreatic Cancer Action right to utilise a dying woman for shock value?

I wish I had...

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Pancreatic Cancer Action.

## Shocking history

Shock advertising of this sort is not new to charities. Children's welfare organisation Barnardo's has form in this area. In 1999, it ran a **campaign** using images of very young babies appearing to inject heroin, while in 2003 it ran **poster campaigns** depicting a new born baby with a cockroach emerging from its mouth. The intention was to show the potentially miserable and alarming futures faced by vulnerable and disadvantaged young people from the start of their lives. And no one could dispute the arresting and disturbing potency of the imagery.

Moving forward, in 2012 St John's ambulance showed the journey of a cancer sufferer's life from diagnosis to recovery only to see him, through his daughter's eyes, die from an unrelated **choking accident** at a barbecue. The message was that knowledge of first aid could save 140,000 lives each year – the same number who die from cancer. It became the **10th most complained about** television advertisement of the year.

Clearly, charities have been allowed a certain amount of "leeway" in using content some may consider offensive, partly because of the seriousness of the subject matter and the importance of raising awareness. In the last few years, though, concerns have been raised about the increasing use of disturbing and emotive imagery to elicit a response. As a result the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has agreed to put **more checks and balances** in place when assessing complaints about charity and public service ads. Pancreatic Cancer Action may face an investigation after the ASA received **118 complaints**.

So why do charities resort to shock tactics? The answer is simple. The more disturbing or emotive the message, the more likely it is to bring forth response. And while an audience may express disgust or revulsion, that does not necessarily translate into a lack of support for a particular cause. As Lindsay Gormley, assistant director of marketing at Barnardo's, **puts it**:

*Barnardo's has a history of hard-hitting advertising that brings [the gravity of the situation] to life in a powerful and emotional way ... For the vast majority of viewers the messages are*

*clear, and as a result we see a substantial increase in people wanting to support Barnardo's work.*

Team Darwin, the agency behind, the “I wish I had breast cancer” campaign argues, perhaps predictably, that other charities should be emboldened to follow their lead. According to chief creative Greg Phitidis:


*within 48 hours of the campaign breaking, global news channels were advising on signs and symptoms. And our client has been invited to Westminster to discuss research and funding with MPs, something that would never have happened if we'd taken the edge off the campaign.*

The link between Team Darwin's campaign and parliamentary involvement in this instance is undeniable. However, it would be foolish not to acknowledge that in certain cases the danger is that the shock value of an ad becomes the currency of debate rather than the issue it is trying to promote.

In the case of the St John's ambulance campaign, the point was to raise awareness and spur the public into action. In these cases, there is some concern that shock advertising, while improving profile, can alienate the intended audience. To take one example, Cancer Research UK explored a range of options when looking at how best to encourage people to visit their GP upon discovering an early symptom of cancer. “We found that using a hard-hitting approach in that instance didn't really work because people are very afraid,” says marketing manager Abigail Brown. “If someone thinks they might have cancer or has a symptom, they're likely to try to push it out of their mind.”

For most charities though, the bottom line is raising enough money to continue to operate effectively. Fundraising can depend on publicity generated, and charities are under pressure to stand out and be noticed in the 24/7 culture of fleeting images and rolling news.

When ActionAid toned down its imagery of extreme poverty in the face of criticism, campaigning became “unsuccessful from a fundraising viewpoint”. For Greg Phitidis, the man behind “I wish I had breast cancer”, the UK is suffering from cause fatigue and the “bold approach” is the only way forward.

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