

# Creating Public Awareness Campaigns

Marion Janner identifies the strategies needed to change public attitudes towards crime and sentencing.

There were 35,000 photographs in the presidential library of Franklin D. Roosevelt - only two showed him in a wheelchair. Among all the political cartoons of the president remarkably none showed him as disabled. Is this a compelling argument for or against 'spin'? And what lessons, if any, are there for the ways in which information is conveyed about crime and sentencing?

This article isn't about what the public do or don't know or believe about crime, as this is covered elsewhere in CJM. This is a quick race through whether it is possible to increase awareness and to change attitudes, and if so, how best to achieve this.

In the last two years there has been an explosion of interest in public opinion - typified by the *Sentencing Framework Review* report which stated that an "assessment of public views on how sentencing should operate has informed its recommendations for a new framework".

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Practical initiatives to translate these concerns into public awareness initiatives include the government cross-department initiative to increase public confidence in the criminal justice system; the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation's Rethinking Crime and Punishment project, the Magistrates Association's 'Magistrates' in the Community' scheme and the work of the No Way Trust. These are the latest additions to a long tradition of voluntary sector campaigning and communication - exemplified by Nacro's prominent broadsheet and broadcast coverage.

Payback is a small voluntary organisation which promotes community penalties for non-violent offenders in order to improve the sentencing climate and reduce the prison population. This task is, happily, the easier one of changing attitudes rather than actions. An invaluable resource for those facing the much harder behavioural challenge is *Fostering Sustainable Behavior* by McKenzie-Mohr and Smith. This details page after page of apparently sound information-based campaigns which haven't made the slightest difference. These are heart-stopping tales for public educators trying to achieve behavioural change and still very salutary for those of us merely trying to bring about modest shifts in attitudes. There are definitely no grounds for complacency.

To begin, let's consider whether providing the

public with some accurate information about crime and sentencing can bring about any improvements. Mike Hough, who has pioneered this area of enquiry in the UK, writes in this issue of CJM of the popularity of punitive attitudes towards crime and offenders, and of the need to use social marketing techniques to work for a shift in attitude. This issue also features a piece by Gillespie and McLaughlin reporting on recent research commissioned by Esmée Fairbairn's Rethinking Crime and Punishment. Their research reveals areas of public ignorance about the criminal justice system (sentencing for example), despite the pervasiveness of non-fiction media coverage of crime issues. Interestingly, they found that a fictional genre - the soap opera - was an effective format for allowing the audience to adopt a broader perspective and less punitive attitude.

Perhaps what is called for is what social psychologists refer to as the book-keeping

(incremental) rather than conversion (road to Damascus) model of attitude change, as described in Louise Bower's *Campaigning with Attitude*, downloadable from the Payback website. What emerges is a complex picture of which groups change which sorts of attitudes, in which directions and for how long.

Any residual sanguine tendencies amongst campaigners will be finally extinguished by tales, sadly empirically based, of the boomerang effect. This is the depressing occurrence of an audience modifying their attitude in exactly the opposite direction to that intended by the public educators - and this phenomenon is well-documented. But there is also enough movement in the direction of enhanced information and attitudes for Payback to clutch onto the fact that the more that people know about community penalties, and the more involved they become in the 'story' of even a hypothetical offender, the more enthusiastic they are about alternatives to custody.

So, the evidence is that education campaigns are worth doing, leaving just the art of how to do them well. The complete essentials are:

- meticulous planning
- not skimping on monitoring and evaluation, from start to beyond finish
- starting with the audience's perspective, needs

- and motivations, rather than our own
- involving the most talented marketing and communications professionals we can afford.

We wouldn't hire an electrician who has seen a few good TV crime programmes to carry out a challenging criminological task, nor a criminologist who is devoted to make-over programmes to rewire a house. So we should employ brilliant journalists, designers, illustrators and broadcasters if we are serious about producing fabulous information, and we must ground their creative work in the findings and advice of experts in social marketing, social psychology and media studies.

The most consistent message from all research on how people learn, including how they are motivated to engage with new information, is to make it interactive. Dave Meier describes this crisply in *The Accelerated Learning Handbook*: "What the learner says or does is more important than what the instructor or the instructional media says or does for the actual learning.... Knowledge is something a learner creates."

Meier goes on to warn against the easy but hopeless "false belief that teaching is telling and learning is observing." It is indeed very tempting for us to simply churn out leaflets and (worse) reports and feel the job is done. Dave Meier describes the four essential stages of learning – leave one out (let alone three!) and you're unlikely to achieve any substantial or certainly sustained learning. It's all obvious when you look at it, but how often are all the following properly carried out in the criminal justice sector?

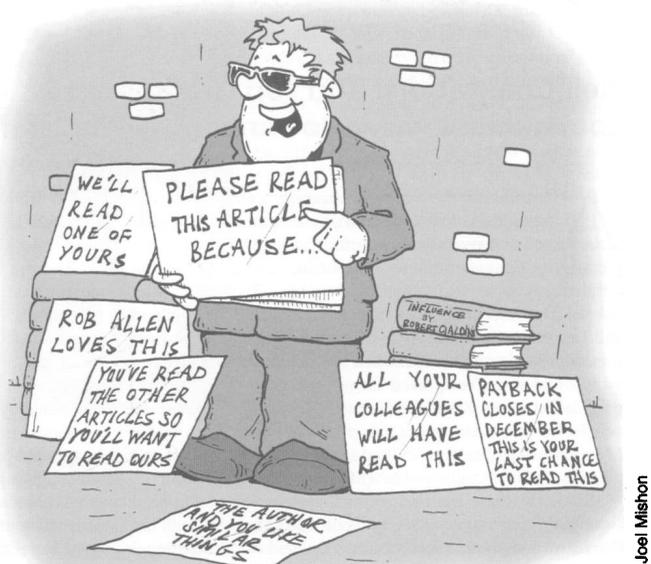
- preparation - stimulating interest.
- presentation - first experiencing the new knowledge.
- practice - getting the hang of it.
- performance - applying it at work.

One approach to generating and maintaining audience interest is the use of stories. Who wouldn't rather read a multi-layered, emotionally infused, true account of what led someone to commit a crime and what the consequences were, rather than plough through dozens of slightly obtuse statistics?

"Resonant stories are essentially reframes. Like putting on different pairs of glasses, stories allow us to look at life and experience in ways that can shift our perspective, range and focus." *The Magic of Metaphor*, Nick Owen.

This is particularly interesting in relation to the strength of television and radio dramas in conveying the necessarily complex issues about crime and sentencing. The following points, extracted from Lesley Henderson's report *Incest In Brookside: Audience Responses to the Jordache Story* (1996) show the 'public education' benefits of portraying one particular type of crime through a fictional treatment.

- fiction reaches larger audiences than factual programmes
- fictional output can reach different audiences from news and documentaries
- fictional accounts generate a high level of debate through other media outlets. Factual reports are often 'hooked' to



Payback's interpretation of the 'six principles of influence' from *Influence* by Robert Galdini, Allyn & Bacon.

fictional storyline features in the press and actors are interviewed across a range of media formats which reach diverse audiences.

- factual media is bound by legal and ethical restrictions which cover, for example, anonymity of victims. In fiction, audiences can see and hear the 'abuser and the 'victim'.
- the soap opera format allows long term treatment of social problems in which complex issues can be played out, e.g. ambiguities concerning 'collusive' mothers and victims' conflicting feelings of guilt/love towards their abuser

The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies has created superb examples of pioneering information resources in its factsheets for the website of the hugely popular TV prison drama series, *Bad Girls*. Impactful public education can be done; needs to be done rigorously, imaginatively and collaboratively, and the research proves that it's worth it.

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CCJS' factsheets accompanying each week's *Bad Girls*' episode are on: <http://www.badgirls.co.uk/library/libindex.htm>

#### References:

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