

FINDING AND WORKING WITH A GREAT ADVERTISING/PR AGENCY

(Developed by Colleen Stevens, M.S.W., Chief, Media Unit, Tobacco Control Section,
Department of Health Services, California)

I. Qualities to Look For in an Agency

The very first step toward achieving an effective advertising campaign is to get a good agency and build a strong partnership with them. The agency that will be most successful at supporting the comprehensive tobacco prevention movement will have all or most of the following qualities:

- 1) *An understanding of the strategic and political realities of the tobacco control universe.* They should understand the history of tobacco control; who the players are and what they contribute; what is happening at the local, state, and national level; and what smokers and nonsmokers believe and think about tobacco use and exposure to environmental tobacco smoke (ETS). The agency also should have the ability to be responsive to, and flexible within, the changing tobacco environment. If they do not have this knowledge or expertise when you hire them, you must take responsibility to help them develop it.
- 2) *An understanding of their partnership with the state.* Advertising and public relations agency personnel will become an extension of the state health department staff. Their personnel will have a close connection to media outlets, local events, and local programs' staff. They must encourage state staff to be bold and daring, even when bold and daring ads seem less likely to be approved by the more cautious executives who must approve the campaign. One must make every effort to educate those in power to the need to stay in focus on the strategic goals of the campaign. The agency must have the expertise for strategically countering and out-maneuvering the tobacco industry tactics designed to influence and addict the public. At the same time, these agency personnel must realize that they are representatives of their client, usually the state, which means they must be cognizant of the bureaucratic realities, and they must appropriately represent the client's position with regard to policies and strategies.
- 3) *Superior creative expertise.* Finding an advertising/public relations team that can produce powerful, effective ads and marketing tools which will move the social norm in the right direction, while maintaining a positive partnership with state health education program staff and local programs, can be a challenge. Proposers for California's tobacco education media campaign have all submitted creative ideas that, taken alone, make them appear to be outstanding. However, an ongoing campaign requires more than just one shot of brilliance, so the agencies' history, business depth, and subcontractors' ability to extend the reach of messages to as wide an audience as possible must all be considered.
- 4) *Appropriate size and fiscal history.* The size of the agency is important. The agency should be large enough to staff the contract appropriately and handle the fiscal responsibilities, yet the agency must be small enough to consider your contract a high priority account. The agency needs to have sufficient experience, depth of personnel, and infrastructure to support your

contract's size and complexity.

- 5) *Leadership and “good chemistry.”* It is essential to find out during the bidding/proposal process just who exactly will be assigned to the account and their level of commitment and experience. Insist that the people with whom state staff will be working on a day-to-day basis are the same people who are involved in the presentations before the contract is awarded. Do not award a contract to a great group of advertising pitch professionals who will disappear mysteriously when the less glamorous work begins. Additionally, the agency’s senior account management staff must have passion for, and dedication to, the goals of tobacco control.

It also helps if state and agency personnel have that intangible quality called “good chemistry” which makes for clear communication, discussion, and negotiations and trust, rather than a tiring, tedious, tangled web of distrust and miscommunication. Good chemistry is enhanced by the state staff’s experience with media and public relations principles and objectives as well as the agency staff’s experience with government, public health, and social norm change campaigns. It also helps when the state staff displays creativity and innovation that will support and challenge the staff of the advertising agency. Clues to the presence or lack of “chemistry” are first visible during proposal review process. If the state’s proposal evaluators have difficulty understanding the written proposal, and the oral presentation does not reveal direct links between agency creative and the state’s needs, it is unlikely that “good chemistry” will be present in the day-to-day interactions of agency and state personnel. It is very important to allow a question-and-answer discussion period at the end of the oral presentation or sometime during the proposal process, which will give the proposal evaluators an opportunity to see how state and agency staff will interact and relate.

- 6) *No conflict of interest.* The tobacco industry business web is enormous. Your advertising team cannot serve two masters, so they must be required to disclose any potential conflict of interest, including agency staff’s business ties and the agency’s client base. It can be a sacrifice for an agency to take on a tobacco education media contract because it means refusing business with tobacco companies and all of their subsidiaries and affiliates; the same is true of subcontractors and public relations firms.

II. Selecting the Proposal Review Team

The criteria for selecting the proposal review team are as important as criteria for contractor selection. Reviewers who understand the advertising business and its jargon and can separate substance from glitz are essential. Advertisers and public relations agencies are experts at glitz and selling their own business, and, unfortunately, in too many proposals the gimmicks outweigh the substance. Ask in the RFP for what you want in the proposal format: simplicity and substance, without gimmicks and glitz. The emphasis should be on the strength of the proposal and the probability that the agency can deliver on its plan. Also, it is important to have reviewers who can decipher media cost proposals, which can be quite complex, especially for those not versed in the language of media. The ideal combination of reviewers is one-third program staff, one-third constituency members, and one-third advertising/public relations experts.

III. Working Effectively with the Agency you Hire

After the best agency is selected, their expertise must be heard. They were hired to give expert advice from their unique professional perspective. Their advice must be combined with the public health and tobacco control knowledge on the part of program staff. Marrying the power of advertising and the principles of public health can sometimes be a rocky marriage. Copy writers and creative directors fall in love with their advertising, and it is necessary at times to take them back to the foundation strategies and goals of the program and/or the political realities of the current situation without demotivating them.

Placing and targeting the ads may become a source of conflict between the advertising and public health experts. Public health groups may want a commercial for every possible target population, but that will scatter and dilute the messages, not to mention the budget-breaking cost. Instead, the program must rely on strategically targeted placement of a few key messages based on proven strategies. The California program, for instance, normally runs no more than three general market television spots at any given time, with sufficient repetition to be memorable, without wearing out the freshness of the messages.

Another balancing act is between gaining maximum input from the constituency and target groups while avoiding becoming bogged down in “creative by committee.” It is essential to consult with constituents and local programs to make sure the message is on target and on strategy, so program activities and media will support, supplement, and magnify one another. The media is a tool to help the local programs get their job done. If media is developed without their participation, local program staff cannot plan effectively nor can they integrate the media into their program plan. At the same time, the decision making for creative must rest with a core group of individuals who can weigh all of the considerations involved in conducting an effective health advocacy campaign.

While “creative by committee” can be fragmented and scattered, “creative by state bureaucracy” can be an even worse disaster. Both the state tobacco control program and its advertising agency must be empowered and challenged to produce bold, brazen, fresh, and extraordinary advertising that can compete effectively with the flood of advertising messages of all kinds, including those from pro-tobacco forces, that inundate the public. An approval process for anti-tobacco advertisements that allows only those ads that are “politically correct,” and are guaranteed to offend no one, is doomed to fail to reduce tobacco use.