

Informing the Public With Infomercials

BY BARBARA RUBEN

“Lovers of tobacco, we have bad news for you,” begins what seems to be a television commercial. “Smoking does cause cancer. Smoking kills one out of four cancer patients.”

When this anti-smoking piece first aired on Russian television, some viewers weren’t sure what to make of the interruption to the regularly scheduled show. It wasn’t a typical advertisement, nor was it exactly a public service announcement.

Rather it was an infomercial—a type of editorial commercial—designed to encourage viewers to quit smoking. The

piece was produced by AIHA Moscow/Pittsburgh partners at Magee Womancare International and Savior’s Hospital and sponsored by cosmetic manufacturer Avon. In addition to the anti-smoking piece, Magee has also produced 17 other spots on topics such as prenatal care, osteoporosis, and drug and alcohol abuse. The anti-smoking segment, along with three others from the series, have been distributed to AIHA’s Women’s Wellness Centers to aid in patient education. Millions more women throughout Russia have seen them while

watching their favorite television programs.

“They have been very well received by viewers,” says Jeanne Cooper, a community outreach coordinator for Magee Womancare International, which works in partnership with Savior’s Hospital in Moscow and institutions in Minsk, Belarus. “It’s not a traditional means of transmitting information and I think that has piqued people’s interest.”

Although Magee has used similar spots to reach its own target audience in Pittsburgh for the past 13 years, Cooper points out that the infomercials produced for Russia are quite different from most of those aired on US television, which are half-hour commercials designed to get consumers to buy a product or service.

Aired on television stations throughout Russia, a series of infomercials produced by AIHA’s Moscow/Pittsburgh partners seeks to educate women on healthcare issues and healthy lifestyle choices.



Exercise, good nutrition, and avoiding tobacco and overindulgence of alcoholic beverages are all part of a piece promoting healthy lifestyles.



A piece on menopause offers some useful advice—exercise, healthy diet, and monthly breast self-examination—for women at this stage of their life.



A segment on breastfeeding gives helpful tips to new mothers.



In a segment on high blood pressure, viewers are warned of the ill effects of too much stress and are given methods of coping such as meditation, counseling, and exercise.



Prevention is the message of a segment on osteoporosis, which encourages women to exercise, eat well-balanced meals that are rich in calcium and other nutrients, and not to smoke.



A spot on breast health notes the importance of monthly self-examinations, and encourages women to have mammograms after age 40 and to bring symptoms such as lumps and hardening of breast tissue to their doctors’ attention.

Photos courtesy of Magee Womancare International.

The ones produced by Magee are minute-long vignettes whose primary objective is to increase awareness and educate viewers about health and safety issues. Unlike traditional public service announcements, the infomercials are generally produced by a non-profit organization and air time is paid for by a sponsor.

"Infomercials offer a win-win-win situation for everyone involved," Cooper says. "They promote the mission and good name of a non-profit organization. They promote and advertise a business as a sponsor, which can benefit the community in which the business is located. And the TV station gets money and positive community recognition." In addition to being shown on television, the infomercials have been used for training health professionals and students in community health outreach. They also help serve as links between educational centers, she explains.

But when some education centers and NGOs approached television stations with the infomercials two years ago, they initially met with resistance. According to Cooper, this was because of the newness of the concept, a lack of funding, and the fact that staff were not sufficiently trained on how to approach the stations and "sell" the idea behind the infomercials.

To help overcome these obstacles, Magee obtained a grant from the Eurasia Foundation to train employees of NGOs, local television, and the media, and Eurasia Foundation Resource Center staff on infomercial development, fund raising, and other related issues. As a result, three training workshops were held in Russia last year and, according to Cooper, the commitment of workshop participants to the concept of using infomercials as a tool for social change has been "unexpectedly swift and aggressive."

Several projects in Russia have been completed since the workshops took place. In Tomsk, the Novy Illusion television

company collaborated with the local family planning center to create a video series called "Nine and a Half Months," which deals with issues of pregnancy, birth, and the first weeks of an infant's life. In Vladivostok, a local group received a government grant from the regional administration to work with a local TV station to create a series of vignettes that address pregnancy and delivery. In Moscow, the Russian Agricultural Network is attempting to identify funding sources and collaborative partners for an infomercial series on healthcare education for rural communities. And in Tosno,

the Women's Initiative Center is completing an infomercial project that promotes traditional crafts.

For Cooper, one of the most impressive results of the workshops was their success in "cracking the post-Soviet paradigm of advertising as a purely commercial exchange. Most of the 85 participants who attended the sessions expressed their belief that, with time and sustained effort, public service announcements and infomercials could effectively serve the dual purpose of educating as well as advertising."

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and free . . . They talk about freedom, they talk about economics, they talk about liberty. People are looking at tobacco as a way of being modern," he continues.

CECHE's Palmer has run into a parallel impediment in her organization's quest to run anti-smoking material. "In Russia in particular, there's a general feeling that people have such few things to enjoy, they don't want smoking taken away. So there's a tendency in the media to be less accepting of anti-smoking information," she says.

Palmer also notes that although many of the television stations given the anti-smoking PSAs and dramatic series also run cigarette ads, no station has refused to air the pieces. But she adds the continued presence of tobacco advertisements dilutes the effect of CECHE's spots.

Advertising revenues can also influence the mass media's editorial policies. According to Natasha Shulepina, a correspondent for Pravda Vostoka, a newspaper in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Uzbek journalists' salaries come primarily from advertising income; therefore, more tobacco ads may mean less

editorial content about the harmful effects of smoking if journalists are afraid their salaries will be affected by the stories they write.

And education about the harm tobacco does apparently hasn't filtered far into where the information may do the most good: medical schools. In Russia, a 1993 survey found that 48 percent of male medical students and 14 percent of female medical students were smokers. In Slovakia's medical schools, 2.3 percent of first-year students smoke, but that low number rises to 14.6 percent by their fifth year, according to Martin, Slovakia's Kavcova.

For Kazakstan's Tumenova, such statistics only strengthen her resolve to continue to educate citizens in her oblast and advocate for better understanding of the hazards of tobacco worldwide. "The most effective effort is preventive work against smoking," she says. "I think it is a global challenge, and only combined efforts made by many people can result in a positive outcome."

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