



Creativity as the key to success—a plea for more guts in social marketing communication

Answin Vilmar^{1,2}

Received: 19 January 2023 / Accepted: 15 February 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

Despite numerous campaigns, the efforts made not only to inform people of the Strategic Development Goals (SDGs) but also to persuade them to contribute individually to the task of achieving these goals have not yet been sufficient. Namely, awareness of the SDGs remains very low among broad sections of the population. In addition, the statements of these goals are not understood in many cases (World Economic Forum 2020). Finally, behavioural changes based on relevant insights have hitherto been insufficient. This situation is also reflected in the UN report, which attests to the insufficient progress made with regard to achieving the SDGs in most countries and notes that in 2020 and 2021, the SDG Index Score even stagnated (Sachs et al., 2022). However, when one's back is literally against the wall and the achievement of the SDGs within the establish timeframe seems to be becoming increasingly unlikely, the promotion of the courage necessary to find new creative solutions can represent an escape from this perceived standstill.

Keywords SDGs · Creativity · Communication · Campaign efficiency · WARC Creative 100

1 Introduction

1.1 Time is pressing onwards. And those who have nothing left must risk more

At least since the Club of Rome's 1972 report 'The Limits to Growth', which indicated that limitless growth on a finite planet is impossible (Meadows et al., 1972),

✉ Answin Vilmar
avilmar@ist-hochschule.de; info@good.marketing

¹ IST – University of Applied Sciences, Erkrather Strasse 220 a-c, D-40233 Duesseldorf, Germany

² VILMARKETING/good.marketing, Franziusstrasse 29, D-28209 Bremen, Germany

actors in the domains of science, politics, journalism and business have emphasized hard facts or catastrophic scenarios. However, do images such as the polar bear as an icon of climate change, appeals such as ‘Save the forest’, or pictures of starving people or children slaving in mines promote people’s willingness to take more measures to ensure climate protection or provide more humanitarian support? Alternatively, might these recurring, mostly negative messages instead cause the recipients of such messages to become numb, possibly even with regard to their reactions to the 17 SDGs for sustainable development?

It is uncontroversial among experts that social marketing can make an important contribution to the achievement of the strategic development goals (SDGs). However, the existence of untapped potential for optimization in this context has also been acknowledged. The following article attempts to accomplish a change of perspective and aims to promote greater courage and creativity, especially in the context of sustainability communication. Namely, by means of social marketing, which of course includes much more than merely social advertising, the achievement of the SDGs can be supported (even) more effectively.

If we have no more time to lose, we can only win. The risk of losing everything by doing nothing, on the other hand, is much greater.

1.2 SDGs? They mean nothing to the majority

Daily news coverage is dominated by reports on climate change, social injustice and other crises. Bad news is good news. However, the ‘Global Survey on Sustainability and the SDGs’ has shown that awareness of individual UN Sustainable Development Goals remains very low worldwide. An even worse fact is that only a minority of the population is even aware of the existence of the SDGs. Moreover, statements regarding these SDGs are often not understood (World Economic Forum 2020). There is thus still a considerable need for action to increase not only the level of awareness of all relevant target groups but also their understanding of the political and social relevance of the SDGs—as well as, ultimately, those of the population as a whole. At the same time, it is no less important to highlight alternative options for action. After all, the relevant behavioural changes must be initiated through communication.

However, if one does not know the goal, one cannot find the way to achieve it. Nor is it possible to begin this process in the first place, even if social and ecological crises have now had impacts on people’s minds.

1.3 Successful communication is based on proper planning. This claim is especially true when the target groups think quickly

According to Kahnemann (2016), our brain has two different modes of processing data and making decisions. Both modes play a role in determining the products that we buy (or do not buy), the brands that we choose (or avoid), and our overall SDG-related behaviour. Kahnemann calls these two choices ‘Fast Thinking’ (System 1) and ‘Slow Thinking’ (System 2). The following Table 1 (Binet & Carter, 2018) summarizes the differences between these two modes that are particularly important in relation to the creation of success-oriented SDG campaigns:

Table 1 Fast (System 1) and slow (System 2) thinking. (Source: Binet, Carter, 2018)

SYSTEM 1	SYSTEM 2
Dominant mode of thought >95% of brain activity.	Secondary mode of thought <5% of brain activity.
Fast and powerful Honed by millions of years of evolution.	Slow and limited A more recent addition.
Parallel processing Processes millions of inputs simultaneously.	Serial processing Processes selected items in sequence.
Unconscious and automatic response Associative and heuristic processing, which is experienced in the form of feelings, intuitions and habits.	Conscious and deliberate thought Can follow learned rules of thought, e.g. mathematics, logic and legal reasoning.
Primary decision-making mechanism Strong influence on System 2. Can be influenced by System 2.	Secondary cross-checking mechanism Mostly post-rationalises decisions made using System 1. Can sometimes overrule System 1.
Vast memory capacity Durable memories. Long-term influence on behaviour.	Limited memory capacity Quickly overwritten. Short-term influence on behaviour.
Buying implications Accomplishes most of the decision work regarding purchases. Not logical or rational. Some brands simply feel more attractive. Makes purchase decisions seamless and automatic. Choosing an offer should be a no-brainer.	Is only activated close to the point of purchase. More likely to prevent a purchase than to stimulate it. Involves worry about trying to make people think; they do not like it and would not thank you for it.
Research implications Difficult to research. System 1 is predominant, but we are mostly unaware of its influence.	Research exaggerates importance. We mistakenly attribute actions to System 2 because it represents the thinking of which we are conscious.
Communications implications Trained, not taught. Brand building focuses on creating associations, feelings and habits through repeated exposure.	Influenced by messages, arguments and information, but only late in the decision-making process.

Many campaigns in support of SDG imply slow, rational thinking on the part of their target groups and are based on the System 2 approach. These campaigns are reason-oriented and try to educate the targets by providing comprehensive information. However, this approach does not play a role in most purchasing decisions. Accordingly, campaign planning must take the fast thinking (System 1) of the recipients into account with increased focus.

1.4 Crises require creativity. Many crises require more creativity

As long as everything is running smoothly, no one needs to worry. Only a crisis forces people to become creative. After all, if you have your back to the wall, you must identify a way to salvage the situation and escape the tight spot you face. However, if a single crisis already requires creativity, how much more creative must we become to overcome the many crises we currently face?

Rethinking is the order of the day. With regard to the SDGs, we no longer face a knowledge deficit - we face a crisis of ambition and implementation! This point brings us to the original field of marketing communication, whose goal is usually to arouse curiosity, increase ambition and trigger the desired behaviour. A call to action! In the context of social marketing, campaigns in support of the SDGs must therefore do everything possible to close the awareness-attitude-behaviour gap to ensure that attitudes translate into action. However, this goal cannot be achieved based on pure information campaigns that address System 2 rather require more courage to find unconventional ways to help Kahnemann's System 1 get off the ground.

What role does creativity play in this context? How does creativity produce the desired results? What factors should be considered when developing creative SDG campaigns? Binet and Carter (2018) provide helpful answers to these questions:

- “Always aim for creative work that is utterly distinctive and immediately recognizable as being about the SDG and/or your brand.
- Understand how your campaigns will work. Are they System 1 or System 2 campaigns (see Fig. 1). The role of creativity is different in each context.
- For a System 1 campaign, do not make a fuss about explicit messages or rational persuasion. Use creativity to evoke feelings and create associations to influence people in less conscious, rational ways. These ways may not ‘make sense’, rationally speaking.
- For a System 2 campaign, use creativity to highlight [the SDG-related] product, brand and message. Do not distract from them. Simple messages work best.
- Do not think that ‘emotion’ in System 1 campaigns means making people cry or laugh out loud. The feelings involved may be more low-key.
- In addition, do not think that persuasion in System 2 is totally rational. Emotions and feelings are central to all human decisions. The way in which you say it is as important as what you say.
- Do not think that creativity is simply about innovation. Sometimes innovation is important. System 2 campaigns may focus on ‘new news’. A completely new idea can also elicit a strong System 1 response.
- However, sometimes it is just as effective to ‘do the common thing uncommonly well’” (Binet & Carter, 2018).

Hastings and Domegan (2014) have already identified the notion of creative orientation, i.e., finding imaginative ways to ensure that people become more involved is a key aspect of increasing the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns.

Ultimately, campaigns in support of the SDGs are aimed at achieving only one goal: behavioural change towards greater sustainability. The courage to be creative

helps achieve this goal, especially in times of crisis. It is therefore high time to promote more creativity in SDG campaigns.

1.5 Creativity beats money because creativity is more efficient

If we do not have sufficient money, we must at least have sufficiently creative ideas. In other words, “Never underestimate the importance of creativity. Great creativity can make your budget work 10 times harder” (Binet & Carter, 2018; Smith & Yang, 2004) highlighted the importance of creativity in advertising communication, noting that “[t]he relationship between creativity and advertising is long, rich and textured. Creativity is considered to be an important determinant of advertising effectiveness, and advertising textbooks normally devote one or two chapters to creative strategy and tactics”. In this context, creativity is understood as a function of divergence (in the sense of new, unusual, or unique) and relevance (i.e., meaningful, appropriate or valuable to the audience.). However, numerous studies (e.g., Trommsdorff, Becker, 2001) have also proved that the desired effect can be achieved with the right creative idea, especially if communication budgets are very limited. Moreover, questions of effectiveness and efficiency tend to be decided by a creative idea, not by the largest budget.

Creativity is thus considered to be a decisive factor in the success of a campaign. This claim is certainly also and especially true for social marketing campaigns.

1.6 Creativity knows no bounds

In social marketing campaigns, shock therapy is often used: with the display of increasingly drastic images, attention is drawn to grievances that are already more or less known. In this context, i.e., with respect to such serious topics as poverty, hunger, the climate crisis, inhumane work, or inequalities, is it acceptable to use humour, for example, as a creative communication style? The answer to this question is yes. Namely, humour represents a person’s ability to face the inadequacies of the world and people as well as everyday difficulties and misfortune, with an attitude of cheerful calmness. In this respect, humour can help establish stronger bonds with other people. Health, sanity and happiness depend to a great extent on the quality of relationships. In addition, laughter unites people. Humour serves to decrease differences and reduce tensions. Black humour can also be used to attract attention, especially when a serious message is to be conveyed. However, humour should never be used at the expense of others. The primary goal of communication must continue to be to support the achievement of the SDGs, not necessarily to polarize.

1.7 Campaign makers are often bolder than their work

However, social marketers often appear to be bolder and more creative than the campaigns that they design. Possible reasons for this gap could be the hesitancy of public clients who view themselves as exposed to greater pressures from society. Alternatively, it could be due to the increased pressure to justify expenditures related to donations or tax money. Finally, long tendering procedures and committee decisions that follow more

political rules and fewer professional marketing rules are hardly likely to lead to the best solution, no matter how strong the individual's will may be.

However, fortune favours the brave. This adage is evidenced by numerous international examples.

1.8 Creativity prevails, including internationally and in social marketing

The 'WARC Creative 100' is a ranking of the world's most frequently awarded campaigns and companies with regard to creativity in marketing communication. This ranking tracks various international advertising competitions, such as Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, D&AD, The One Show, the Clio Awards, the London International Awards (LIA), Spikes Asia, Adfest, Eurobest, Golden Drum, Dubai Lynx, Loeries and El Ojo de Iberoamérica. In each case, participants must demonstrate the creativity of their campaigns based on their entries. The campaigns then receive points for the creative prizes that they win in these competitions (WARC 2022).

The better results these campaigns receive in the individual competitions, the more points are awarded. The results are encouraging: among the 100 most creative campaigns worldwide, aside from the 'retail' category, the largest number of campaigns are drawn from the 'nonprofit, public sector and education' sector, which is particularly relevant to social marketing (see Fig. 1).

The winning social marketing campaigns were drawn from a total of nine different countries, including the USA, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Lebanon, Mexico, Italy, Brazil and New Zealand. The content of the social marketing topics addressed in these campaigns covered different ecological and social concerns.

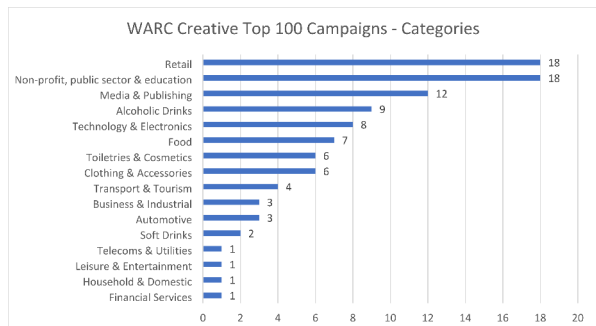
What works on the international stage also deserves a chance at the local and community levels: greater creativity!

2 Conclusion

There is no question that change requires guts. Creativity does as well. However, paths are made by walking them. There are no limits to the ability to imagine a future world. A lack of creativity is no longer a valid excuse in this context.

In addition, courageous and creative ideas regularly challenge outdated views and traditional conventions. This process sometimes faces considerable resistance. How-

Fig. 1 WARC Creative Top 100 Campaigns. (Source: Own elaboration based on WARC 2022; n = 100)



ever, who would not want to live in a world in which there is neither poverty nor hunger, in which we are no longer dependent on fossil energy production, and in which all other SDGs have been achieved?

Accordingly, let us summon up our courage and use the creativity that we have to address the important issues of social marketing. What if we do not fail in this task?

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Funding and/or conflicts of interest/competing interests The author declares that no funding, conflict of interest or competing interests are associated with this paper. The responsibility for what is written lies solely with the author.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Binet, L., & Carter, S. (2018). *How not to plan – 66 Ways to screw it up*. Matador: Account Planning Group UK.
- Hastings, G., & Domegan, C. (2014). *Social marketing. From tunes to symphony* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Kahnemann, D. (2016). *Schnelles Denken, langsames Denken*, 21st edition, Penguin Random House, München.
- Meadows, D., Meadows, D., Randers, J., & Behrens, W. (1972). *The Limits to growth – A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*. Universe Books, New York. Accessed 22 December 2022 from www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Limits-to-Growth-digital-scan-version.pdf
- Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., Kroll, C., Fuller, G., & Woelm, F. (2022). *Sustainable Development Report 2022 – From Crisis to Sustainable Development: the SDGs as Roadmap to 2030 and Beyond*. Cambridge University Press. Accessed 22 December 2022 from <https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment-report/2022/2022-sustainable-development-report.pdf>
- Smith, R. E., & Yang, X. (2004). Toward a general theory of creativity in advertising: Examining the role of divergence. *Marketing theory*, 4(1–2), 31–58. Accessed 22 December 2022 from 208.88.132.60/sage3g/sage-uk.war/chaston/Chaston%20Web%20readings%20chapters%201-12/Chapter%209%20-%2011%20Smith%20and%20Yang.pdf.
- Trommsdorff, V., & Becker, J. (2001). *Werbekreativität und Werbeefferktivität. Eine empirische Untersuchung*. Berlin: Arbeitspapier des Lehrstuhls Marketing I.
- WARC. *Creative 100 Ranking* (2022). Accessed 22 December 2022 from <https://www.warc.com/creative/rankings/creative-100/top-campaigns/2022>
- World Economic Forum (2020). *The Global Risk Report 2020*. Accessed 15 December 2022 from https://www.oebu.ch/admin/data/files/section_asset/file_de/4267/wef_global_risk_report_2020.pdf?lm=1580455303

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.