

Is FRANK losing it?

Has the government's FRANK campaign lost its original focus?

Jonathan Akwue examines the issues – and the pitfalls – involved in trying to communicate drug safety information to young people.

FRANK is the national campaign that was launched by the government in May 2003 in a flurry of media attention. For once the hype surrounding it appeared justified because although it attracted criticism in some quarters for projecting an image that might only appeal to white men, the television advertisements that were used to launch the campaign broke new ground by successfully using humour to convey its message – a first for a health promotion campaign from the government, and all the more surprising given the sensitive nature of the debate about drugs in this country. A Home Office spokesperson on FRANK explained the rationale:

'Before the campaign was launched extensive research was carried out with young people, parents and stakeholders to ensure FRANK was the most approachable and effective service for people wanting in the facts about drugs.'

You need to consider the style of government sponsored drug campaigns that had come before to appreciate the size of the departure that the FRANK campaign represented. These ranged from the scare

tactics of the 'Just say no' campaign featuring heroin addicted 'Zamo' from Grange Hill in the 1980s, to more recent Dance Safely promotions that featured factual, but bland information about drugs. The message was clear – drugs are no laughing matter. FRANK changed all this with TV ads featuring people hugging lampposts on ecstasy, and getting knocked over by curling balls while stoned. The tone was irreverent, tongue in cheek and 'knowing'. They achieved the almost impossible feat for any government campaign of saying 'we know what's going on', whilst underlining the point that taking drugs is illegal, talking about them isn't.

The approach clearly worked. Calls to the FRANK helpline (formerly the National Drug Helpline) went through the roof, and research showed that in the 12 months following the campaign's launch the numbers of young people who recognised the FRANK logo and could recall the ads was as high as 59 per cent.

Despite this early success, more recently – like the characters in its ads – FRANK seems to be losing the plot. There are several contributing

reasons for this, the first was the decision made right at the start of the campaign not to control FRANK's brand image.

To ensure that FRANK became known as widely as possible, the government released a resource pack containing FRANK logo templates and press releases that could be adapted for local use. The aim was to create 'viral' marketing campaigns where the FRANK brand could trickle through local networks and become part of youth culture. The problem with this approach was that the people responsible for developing these local campaigns were not likely to be experienced creatives, or even young people, but were more often than not, hard pressed commissioners, or local drug services. This meant that the quality of work produced was bound to vary widely, but all of it would bear the FRANK logo.

FRANK has ended up in a number of places, but with no quality control, the brand has started to lose its unique voice. The annual FRANK national stakeholder awards tries to offset this by promoting the most innovative and well designed examples of



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materials bearing the FRANK logo, but as Liz Wakefield of Hey Moscow, the winner of last year's award comments:

'Few DATs have a marketing strategy that sets out exactly what will be achieved and how it will be measured. Little research is done into local attitudes and needs. Promotions are handled by a wide range of people spanning junior to senior, and often people leave and are not replaced for some time. This lack of planning and continuity doesn't match up to the communications challenge, especially when you consider the life changing decisions required by heavy users we want to engage with services.'

Despite attempts to promote good design practice, once the brand genie has been let out of the box, it is impossible to put back in. Can you imagine a major commercial brand letting go of control in the same way?

A second problem with the campaign is that alongside losing its unique voice, FRANK seems to have lost his sense of humour. Recent FRANK Action Updates covering topics such as Substance Misuse

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in the Workplace provide useful information but also include ill-conceived crossword puzzles and quizzes with questions such as:

Who should you speak to for friendly, confidential drugs advice?

- A Your Grandma
- B FRANK (0800 77 66 00)
- C Your boss
- D Bill Clinton

Although admittedly this publication is not aimed directly at young people, by any definition, this is simply not funny. The problem is compounded on the website, where visitors are encouraged to identify their 'Tribe'. Choices include 'Geeks', 'Scallies', 'Gangstas', and 'Townies'. The result is a pointless quiz that tries to recapture that sense of being 'in the know', but fails hopelessly. The government's recently published review of FRANK points to the 1.5 million visits to the FRANK website in the first 12 months, but the same report highlights that less half of young people (47 per cent) believe that the people who work at FRANK really know what they are talking about.

Another criticism levelled at FRANK from the start, was that by choosing the name FRANK, the brand identity would be associated with white males and thereby exclude other sections of the community. Although I understand the thinking behind this argument, I think creating a more 'politically correct' character would have left the government open to the charge of stereotyping minority communities. The key challenge was to see how well could FRANK translate its straight talking, irreverent approach to communicate with women, people from ethnic communities, and other groups. The answer appears to be mixed.

Some of FRANK's campaigns have targeted young women in novel ways (such as the 'ambient media' materials produced for clubs and bars). However, its response to ethnic communities (largely based on translating materials into other languages) has yet to display any real imagination.

Beyond ethnicity, there are question marks as to whether FRANK is communicating effectively with the most socially excluded young people. Research undertaken by In-voke, a national organisation that successfully engages some of the hardest to reach young people, suggested that although many of them could still remember the TV ads, very few of them said they would call the FRANK helpline, and none of them had accessed the website.

So what can we learn from FRANK? I think the government should be congratulated for attempting to launch a credible brand and revolutionising the way that drugs advice is delivered in the UK. However, I think it's also clear that by not carefully managing the brand, FRANK has lost some of its original integrity.

The successes and failures of the FRANK campaign provide several pointers for those of us wanting to communicate health promotion messages to the general public and young people in particular. These can be summed up in three key points.

Recognise the need for authenticity

Essentially each brand is a promise. That promise must remain consistent at every point of contact, as this is what makes a brand authentic. By not prioritising communications or establishing a quality measurement system at a local level, the government has allowed FRANK's authenticity to diminish. You don't know what FRANK you are going to come across these days, and that is a major problem.

If you are going to try to be funny – be funny

Humour is a great way of communicating, but it can be a high-risk strategy. We've all met people who think they are funny but aren't – we generally avoid those people. Advertisements are no different. Ill judged attempts at humour, or trying to be on the level with 'yout' culture can backfire dramatically.

Be honest

Recognise the fact that many young people consider drugs cool, and telling them not to take them isn't. Communicate honestly with your target audience. That was the strength of the original FRANK ads. The best ones were those that expressed an essential truth about drugs in an exaggerated (and humorous) way. Whenever you begin diluting the truth to accommodate more socially acceptable messages, your audience will switch off.

Despite the criticisms, the Home Office remain convinced that the FRANK campaign is working. Their spokesman points out that:

'Since its launch in 2003 there have been over 6 million visits to the website and nearly 900,000 calls have been made to the helpline. In addition to this FRANK has seen fantastic support from stakeholders with over 5000 registered for the campaign at www.drugs.gov.uk and 92 per cent of them happy with the service FRANK offers.'

Whatever your view of FRANK, it is clear that communicating effectively with diverse audiences takes a lot of thought, skillful planning and implementation. Given the importance of the message, it is critical that the same level of creativity is given to promoting public health messages as that which goes into the selling of commercial products. After all, a tin of baked beans won't save your life, but a well-timed message, delivered in the right way, just might.

Jonathan Akwue is business director for In-voke and strategic communications adviser to the Federation of Black and Asian Drug & Alcohol workers. He has over 10 years experience of working in the creative industries and the social care field. In that time he has developed a wide range of campaigns aimed at 'hard to reach' groups. He has recently launched Rat Park; a new communications agency that develops marketing strategies in line with the principles outlined in this article. If you would like to find out more about Rat Park's approach, you can email him at akwue@in-voke.org.uk.