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What Works: Fun for a Change

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Fun for a Change

Volkswagen plays with virtue

BY AARON DALTON

Stockholmers eschew the escalator and trip the stairs fantastic as part of an ad campaign that makes being good fun.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DDB

In June 2009, people going about their ordinary routines in Stockholm encountered a series of perplexing and—most important—fun diversions. One day, commuters at the Odenplan subway station found that the staircase had been replaced with a musical piano keyboard, replete with sound. Young and old alike abandoned their usual ride on the adjacent escalator to scamper up and down the steps. Couples played duets. Children picked out tunes with their parents. Dedicated soloists hopped up and down, losing track of their destinations. During the one-day test, 66 percent more people than usual chose the stairs over the escalator.

Meanwhile, pedestrians out for a stroll in a municipal park came upon the World's Deepest Rubbish Bin—a trash receptacle with sound effects that made it seem as though items were falling into a deep chasm. Some onlookers circled the container, peering inside to get a glimpse of the mighty crater within. A child eager to hear the sound of falling trash scooped up litter off the ground and threw it in. Apparently she was not alone in her enthusiasm: The acoustically enhanced trash can attracted more than twice as much trash—158 pounds in total—as a neighboring ordinary bin.

Other passersby came across the Bottle Bank Arcade Machine, whose blinking lights and digital display promised points in exchange for recycling bottles. Nearly 100 Stockholmers "played" the Bottle Bank Arcade by feeding it bottles. Nearby, a lonely conventional bottle bank received only two deposits.

These three curiosities were not random art installations. Instead, they were part of a recent ad campaign to raise interest in Volkswagen's fuel-efficient line of diesel-powered BlueMotion cars. Volkswagen did not make its involvement with the installments immediately obvious, however. The company instead used videos of citizens interacting with the projects as the centerpiece of its new Fun Theory campaign, which shows that doing the right thing—taking the stairs, reducing litter, recycling bottles, and, presumably, driving an eco-friendly car—can be pleasurable and desirable.

"Normally, if you read ads about this type of car, you hear messages telling you that you must think about climate change or CO_2 emissions," says Marcus Thomasfolk, head of communications at Volkswagen Group Sverige AB. "We wanted to go a different way. We thought that if we made something fun, it might be easier to change behaviors."

With advertising agency DDB Stockholm, Volkswagen first filmed videos of people enjoying the piano staircase, rubbish bin, and bottle bank. It then placed the videos on a Web site (available in both English and Swedish) and cross-posted the videos to YouTube. Within a couple of months, the Fun Theory videos had gone viral: The YouTube videos garnered some 13 million views, and the Web site attracted 940,000 visitors from around the world. The piano staircase video proved particularly popular, winning 10 million views all its own and achieving renown as the most shared film in the history of the Internet.

WIRED TO PLAY

Volkswagen and DDB are the first to admit that they are not social scientists, and their so-called Fun Theory is not based on the rigor-

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ous tests of true scientific theories. At the same time, however, the zany project rests on sound scientific principles.

"There is lots of research showing that the search for fun and novelty is one of the strongest intrinsic aspects of human nature," says Richard M. Ryan, a psychology professor at the University of Rochester whose research focuses on human motivation. "I like the Fun Theory—even if it isn't really a scientific theory—because it taps into this wonderful source of motivation and demonstrates its gravitational pull." He adds that attempts to encourage socially desirable behaviors don't give fun enough attention.

MAKE GOING GREEN FUN

Use humor, surprise, and attractive design

Stage fun public experiments

Gather easily collected and meaningful data

Harness Web 2.0 tools to popularize findings

Nevertheless, a few public health programs do harness the power of fun to make good behaviors more palatable, says Mark Cullen, chief of internal medicine at Stanford University School of Medicine. For instance, popular workplace wellness programs like Dump Your Plump use cartoons to inject some fun into weight loss efforts, helping participants "lighten up" in both senses of the phrase.

Even such serious public health problems as HIV/AIDS prove amenable to more lighthearted interventions, notes J. Douglas Storey, associate director of communication science and research at the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. In Indonesia, for instance, social marketing enterprise DKT Indonesia developed and launched Fiesta condoms, a line of flavored and colored condoms that research suggested would appeal to young people. Partnering with MTV and a range of nongovernmental organizations, DKT not only managed to capture a 10 percent share of the condom market for Fiesta, but also to increase overall condom sales by 2 percent. Similarly, Bangkok-based Population and Development International has long leavened safer sex education with activities such as condom-blowing contests, sexual health-themed board games, humorous advertisements, and songs infused with HIV/AIDS facts.

MORE BANG THAN BUCKS?

Yet some healthy and environmentally friendly activities will never be much fun. "Unfortunately, losing weight, stopping smoking, and wearing a condom are in and of themselves less fun, at least up front, than the alternatives," Cullen points out. The same holds true for, say, passing up a more commodious, less expensive, and seemingly safer SUV in favor of a smaller and more expensive green machine.

So to promote more socially responsible actions, marketers and scientists have long relied on three less sexy motivators: fear, reason, and money. The fear approach encourages people to avoid some dire result by changing their behaviors. For example, over the past 30 years Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) has fought drunk driving by detailing the tragic consequences of alcohol-related crashes. As a result of its efforts, MADD says that annual alcohol-related traffic fatalities in the United States have decreased nearly 50 percent since 1980, from more than 30,000 to less than 15,500.

Yet fear appeals have their limitations: People frequently shy away from gruesome or otherwise threatening information. When they do take in this information, they tend to rationalize that it somehow doesn't apply to them. People also become desensitized to their own fear, especially when the promised tragic consequences fail to transpire. For these and other reasons, MADD's own surveys show that Americans took more than 159 million alcohol-impaired driving trips in 2002, compared with only 116 million such trips in 1997. Because the annual number of alcohol-impaired driving trips is actually on the rise, perhaps the decline in driving deaths owes more to improvements in vehicle safety (airbags, safety cages, and antilock brakes, for example) than to the success of fear-based messaging.

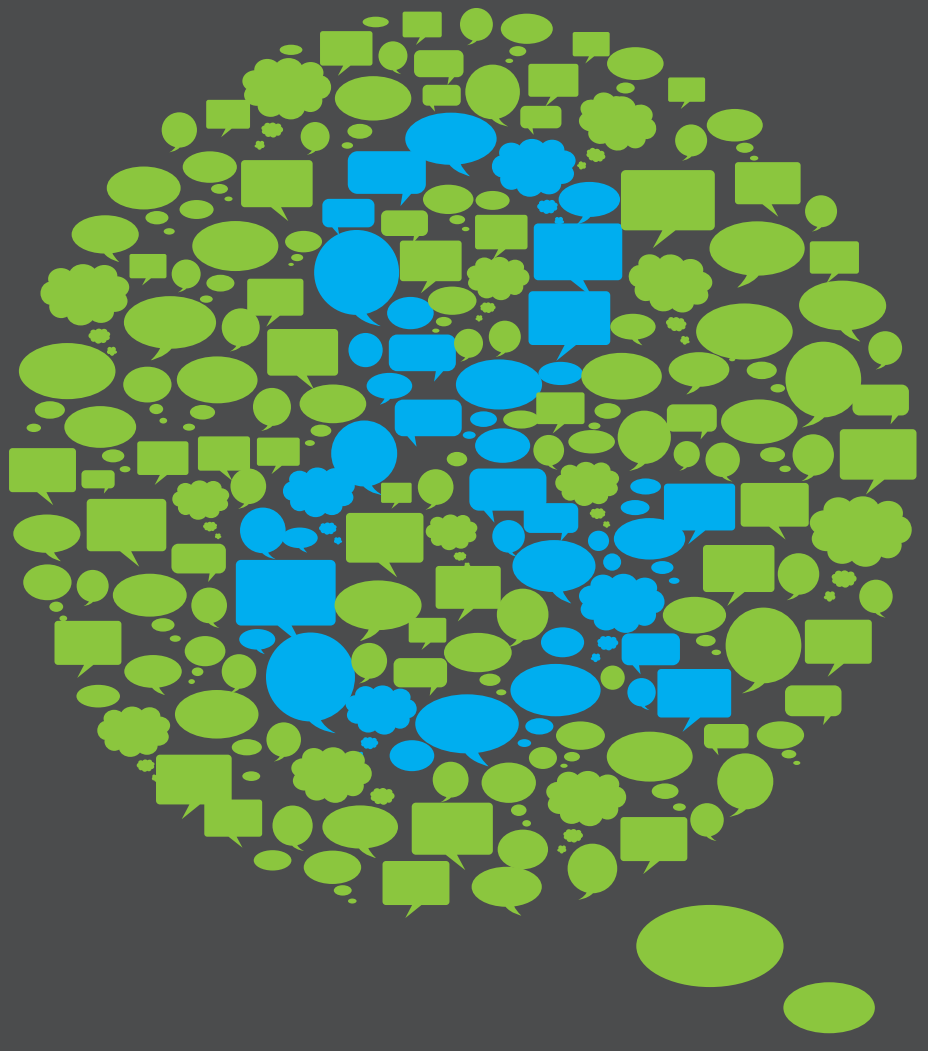
More optimistic advertisers have attempted to move people in healthful or ecologically responsible directions by appealing to their intellect. With its statistics, charts, and wonkish testimonials, former Vice President Al Gore's 2006 film, *An Inconvenient Truth,* is one example of an appeal to reason. Although this work won Gore a Nobel Peace Prize, its effect on people's behaviors seems to have been temporary at best: The number of Americans who believe in global warming has actually fallen by 8 percent, found a November 2009 *Washington Post*-ABC News poll. More broadly, researchers have found that appeals to reason work only when people have the resources—the time, attention, desire, and intellect—to process them.

As behavioral economics has moved to the forefront of the social sciences, money has become a popular motivator of virtuous behaviors. And the profit motive sometimes works, suggests a recent article in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. In a randomized controlled trial, smokers who received financial compensation (from $100 to $400) to give up the cancer sticks were more likely to kick their habit than were unpaid smokers.

Financial incentives can also encourage eco-friendly behavior such as recycling. In the United Kingdom, a recent pilot project by U.S.-based firm RecycleBank showed that recycling rates jumped more than 30 percent when participating households won points based on the weight of their recyclables. Participants could then redeem these points for vouchers with local businesses. In Cherry Hill, N.J., RecycleBank apparently doubled recycling rates, and participating households earned rewards worth $200 or more per year.

Yet money is expensive. And as Stanford University psychologist Mark Lepper's classic research shows, paying people to do things that they would ordinarily do for free can actually curb their enthusiasm to act the same in the future. This is because people infer that they acted just to get the money, rather than to, for example, preserve their own health or save the planet.

Likewise, fun may also have its limits as an inspiration for good. Human beings are complex and adaptable; what is fun today might become boring in a month, or after an umpteenth slog up a piano staircase. But Martin Larsson, interactive accounts director at DDB Stockholm, says that the Fun Theory is less about a specific installation than it is about a new way of changing behavior. "We are not scientists," says Larsson. "We were going on a gut feeling when we created the Fun Theory. But it looks like we hit a lot of other people's gut feelings as well." ■



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