

# Canadian Advertising Success Stories 1999

## Big Brothers

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It's difficult to convince people to give their hard-earned money to help a charity or cause. It is even more difficult to get them to give their personal time. And if your target is young to middle-aged men it is tougher still. Everyone says that they care. But few care enough to follow through when their free time is the price.

Big Brothers depends on these men to be a father-figure and mentor to fatherless boys aged 7 to 12, donating 3 to 4 hours a week for at least a year. But by the end of 1997, there was a crisis in British Columbia. Little Brothers had to wait almost two years for a Big Brother. This was unacceptable to Big Brothers staff, and to the boys left waiting.

Big Brothers had advertised every year, but the effort was sporadic and largely from the national office. Vancouver men were not responding, so Big Brothers approached Glennie Starnes for help. We were shocked at the 2 year wait and felt that in a city as vibrant and tolerant as Vancouver many others would feel the same way.

With almost no money, we developed a campaign that launched at the end of January 1998. Results were overwhelming and rapid, equalling a year's worth of responses in only two months. After the first flight, we had to soften the message in Vancouver City to slow down enquiries. We now had an oversupply of Big Brothers! The new creative was so effective that it is now being adopted by other Big Brothers branches across Canada, with similar results. This paper tells the story.<sup>1</sup>

### SITUATION ANALYSIS

Big Brothers of Greater Vancouver had been in existence for 43 years. But they had never faced such a bleak situation. In 1997, they had almost 200 boys needing help. This made for a two year waiting list, and it was growing weekly.

As a non-profit organization, Big Brothers operates on a minimal annual budget derived from donations and private fund-raising events such as annual bowling and golf classics. They also get limited support from the government and the United Way. Local advertising had been limited to radio, small space newspaper, and posters.

In 1992/93 Big Brothers received the Broadcaster's Humanitarian Award. This included one million dollars worth of free advertising and resulted in 40% more volunteers. However, after the campaign ended in June 1993, numbers dropped to well below pre-advertising days—down 60% by 1997. While lack of advertising accounted for part of this, a local hockey coach scandal and other molestation-by-mentor stories were felt to have contributed as well.

In 1997 volunteerism in Canada was down, and all Big Brothers chapters across Canada were seeing a drop in recruitment. The Vancouver chapter participated in a national TV campaign that was somewhat sporadic, and it produced no significant increase in volunteers. These spots delivered two messages. One was upbeat and feel-good, describing how rewarding and even fun it was to be a Big Brother—with guys tossing a football and climbing trees. The other was 'It only takes a little time'—playing down the time, which had been dropped each year to just a few hours a week.

Big Brothers must be at least 19 years of age, and they come from a wide range of backgrounds. Not only do they have to be willing, but they have to be suitable as well. While they do not require special skills, they must meet basic requirements such as a stable income, some experience with children, access to transportation, and so on. A constant concern is that any campaign which makes young children seem vulnerable or available could attract the wrong element and endanger the boys. So all applicants must go through extensive screening and might be rejected.

## **STRATEGY AND EXECUTION**

This wasn't a typical brand-building campaign. We weren't selling a new car or hockey tickets. We didn't even have a direct competitor to speak of, except the daily distractions which suck up people's time. Put simply, people had to be made to understand the situation, to care, and to act.

The fast pace of life in the 90s did not help. We decided to target the most common respondents, adult men aged 25 to 54. Research told us that 90% of this group were employed, 50% had kids of their own under 18 years of age, and approximately 3 out of 4 were married.

We suspected there were a lot of fence-sitters out there—men who believed in the cause and would like to help, but who were too distracted or busy to commit. But why? The agency team was largely men in the target, so our gut instincts gave us the clue to the problem.

These men see the feel-good national advertising and assume things are going great for Big Brothers; that lots of guys, just like them, but with a little more time, are helping out.

We decided B.C. needed new creative about the dire situation—two school years and two whole summers without the guidance and friendship of a male figure. The tone had to be dramatic and believable, vastly different from feel good.<sup>2</sup>

But even though it was darker in tone, it still had to protect the kids and not make them seem like easy prey. We likened it to a blood drive, telling people there was a crisis and that time was of the essence. Perhaps lives weren't in danger, but the quality of many young lives was at stake.

## **OVERCOMING BARRIERS**

The biggest barrier to this strategy was money. There was almost none. We were willing to develop the strategy and creative for free, but there was no point if no one saw it. Because of the emotional power required to move people, we knew TV would be a key medium.

We took the small amount of launch funding available from Big Brothers (approximately \$17,000) and used it as a media 'honorarium', asking broadcasters to air the new TV spot immediately in the best and most frequent times they could. We offered \$3,333 to five stations. Our media partners rallied round, and continued to air the spot well after the requested February/March push. This gave tremendous added value.

This left the next big task—getting a production house to donate their time and expertise. Fortunately, it had been a boom year for television and movie crews in Vancouver, and many were looking for tax write-offs. We found a skilled crew happy to work for a tax slip from Big Brothers. Next, we found a local film supplier willing to donate old 35mm film stock, and a young director looking to build up his reel.

Rounding out the media was outdoor, for added reach. We convinced Pattison Outdoor to donate 48 transit shelters in Greater Vancouver (approx. 50 GRPs daily) for February and March. After this, they very kindly used our creative to fill any unsold periods as well. We then added local newspaper to the sustaining efforts in September 1998. This helped us target outlying areas such as Langley and Coquitlam, which were slower to respond. The final media component was theatre screen ads (no motion) at Cineplex Odeons: a good demographic match that added reach.

## **THE MESSAGE**

The most important strategic consideration was the creative message. We developed both a campaign line, 'Two years is too long', and a call to action to sign off each ad: 'Please, be a Brother now'.

The TV was designed to make viewers feel a little uncomfortable. It shows a young boy in his room killing time, looking restless, listless, and hopeless. The outdoor and print used dramatic black & white portraits of boys with bold headlines, such as : 'We want to make two years of his life disappear'. These were tough to sell to a client who feared the kids looked like easy prey to pedophiles. We eventually convinced our client that we had to show hurt and frustration, without making the boys look too vulnerable.<sup>3</sup>

This 180-degree turn in messaging and tone was the key. We could not be shy or cautious, since the initial two-month launch in February and March had to have enough impact to carry through to September, when we would have another small (\$19,000) infusion funds.

## **RESULTS**

With the very first postings and broadcasts, responses from potential volunteers started pouring in. The campaign reversed a 4-year downward trend, and doubled the number of Big Brothers recruited over the previous year. In 1997, the total inquiries by potential Big Brothers was 279. At the end of 1998 it was 683.

Our results were easy to measure against our main objective: eliminate the two-year wait by getting qualified new Big Brothers to volunteer as quickly as possible. Within 3 months, the two-year waiting list was eliminated. In fact, in some parts of the city, there was now an 'inventory' of Big Brothers wanting to help.

Not only had the waiting list been turned around, but the quality of the average applicant had also improved dramatically. Big Brothers case workers told us that they had never seen 'such a dedicated and personable group of volunteers.' And a year later, a higher percentage of pairings are together than in the previous 4 years.

So surprising were the results, we entered this tiny localized campaign in the 1998 American Marketing Effectiveness (AME) Awards, held in New York. The campaign won the Gold Medallion for the most effective public service campaign worldwide.

These results have since caught the eye of other Big Brothers chapters across Canada, and the creative has been adapted for use in other markets. So far, though it is still early, they are seeing similar results—most notably in Calgary, with a 270% increase in Big Brother queries after only three months. Staff there report that no previous advertising has had such an immediate and positive effect.

### Isolating advertising as the variable

The strongest indicator that advertising was the main catalyst for the large increase in queries is the direct correlation between the airing of the new campaign and the flood of new recruits. An unprecedented number of calls began immediately with the launch of a new campaign.

**1997 Phone Inquiries by Potential Big Brothers, Month by Month (before new campaign):**

Jan.	Feb.	March	April	May	June	July	August	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Total
30	23	11	15	14	13	22	33	37	35	20	26	279

**1998 Phone Inquiries by Potential Big Brothers, Month by Month (after new campaign):**

Jan.	Feb.	March	April	May	June	July	August	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Total
105*	150	94	52	44	38	35	32	58	30	29	16	683

\*The vast majority of these 105 responses came in the last five days of January, immediately after the campaign started.

There were no notable political or economic shifts in B.C. to affect these results so dramatically. Nor was this a 'new and improved' product. Indeed, at the start of a new year, such distractions as family visits, post holiday clutter and poor weather would, if anything, hinder our efforts.

It is also important to note that when a potential Big Brother first calls (all creative featured the phone number) they are asked what motivated them to call. Although specific numbers are not available, Big Brothers staff report that almost all indicated they were affected by the advertising's message.

We also considered the (theoretical) possibility that people on the phones at Big Brothers had suddenly become more adept at 'hooking' prospects—but this would not explain the sudden increase in men making the initial call. This increase clearly coincided with the launch of the new campaign.

Spending levels obviously play a role, but it is clear that spending alone does not drive results (based on the lower response to earlier advertising efforts.) Absolute spending was extremely low—an initial infusion of \$17,666 in February 98 and another of \$19,974 in September 98. Actual delivery was much higher than this, of course, because of the tremendous contra—which was estimated at 10 to 1 versus actual media vs. paid.<sup>4</sup>

A public relations component was also involved, with releases going out about the crisis. While this was not as visible as the advertising, it will have made some contribution to the response—rates and awareness.

A final isolator is that the results were consistent when the same creative was transported to other markets. For instance, in Calgary, the response was again instant, as noted in the tables that follow:

**Calgary: 1998 Phone Inquiries by Potential Big Brothers, First 3 Months (before campaign):**

January	February	March	Total
18	17	25	60

## **Calgary: 1999 Phone Inquiries by Potential Big Brothers, First 3 Months (after new campaign):**

January	February	March	Total
129	57	36	222

All in all, a very successful and satisfying example of the power of advertising.

### **FOOTNOTES**

1. Similar Challenges. For a complete list of organizations facing similar challenges, see the Index of Cassies Winners at the end of this book. In particular, note the Outward Bound, Goodwill and ABC CANADA cases in CASSIES III.

2. Problem versus Opportunity. Another example of challenging the conventional wisdom.

3. Showing the Target Audience: Yes or No. Although the cases are very different, note the parallel with Wonder Bread, where the decision was also made to show reality.

4. Editor's note on PSA Media. A high contra ratio is evidence that the media found the creative very compelling. This is a key requirement in PSA campaigns.



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