Television Public Service Announcements as Outreach for Potential Clients

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Public service announcements (PSAs) aired by local radio or television stations may be useful to human service agencies as a mechanism to reach potential clients during periods of low service demand. To examine the usefulness of PSAs for this purpose, a series of PSAs were videotaped for three aging-service agencies and aired by a television station during a 6-week period. The three agencies recorded the incoming demand for services received each day before and during the intervention period. The data were tested by a multiple-group interrupted time-series analysis. The results of the analysis indicated that for all three agencies the PSAs were effective for increasing the number of service inquiries received from nonclients over the

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telephone numbers publicized in the PSAs. At one of the agencies, the number of new clients increased significantly when the PSAs were broadcasted.

At many human service agencies, the number of individuals requesting services fluctuates over time, creating periods when service demand slumps substantially below the amount of services that an agency can provide. As a result, the agency cannot deliver services to its maximum capacity, many community members remain in need of services even though services are readily available, and if the agency receives government funding, tax money is not used to optimal benefit.

During such slump periods, service demand may be increased by linking an agency directly to new clients (Sasser, 1976). Ideally, a linking mechanism for reaching potential clients must be cost-effective and flexible enough so that demand can be developed quickly during nonpeak periods but not when demand reaches the agency’s maximum capacity for service delivery.

One technique that could prove effective as a linking mechanism and which is already available to many eleemosynary or government-supported service agencies is publicizing the availability of services by broadcasting public service announcements (PSAs) on local radio or television stations in an agency’s catchment area. If PSAs were effective as linking mechanisms when aired by only one or few local stations, the benefits for human service agencies would be many. A media campaign that relies entirely on radio or television PSAs (a) would probably be less expensive to prepare than a large-scale multimedia publicity campaign, (b) would consume less staff time to implement and manage, and (c) when service demand reached the agency’s maximum capacity, the campaign could be quickly stopped by asking the stations to discontinue airing the PSAs, thus avoiding the problem of publicizing services that the agency could not immediately deliver.

A number of field studies have described the use of PSAs and mass media campaigns as linking mechanisms (Freimuth & Van Nevel, 1981; Friedrich, 1977; Iversen, Silberberg, & Belk, 1970; Leach & Associates, 1979).

*A PSA is defined by the Federal Communications Commission as an announcement “for which no charge is made and which promotes programs, activities or services of Federal, State or local governments (e.g., recruiting, sales of U.S. Savings Bonds, etc.) or the programs, activities or services of nonprofit organizations (e.g. UGF, Red Cross, Blood Donations, etc.) or any other announcements regarded as serving community interests” (47 Code of Federal Regulations 73.1810 (d) (4)).