

Only people generating bad publicity say there is no such thing

 By [Walter Pike](#)

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There is no such thing as bad publicity. That's what people defending bad publicity always say. But it's not true the only publicity that bad publicity is better than is no publicity, good publicity beats it hands down.

The NSPCA dogfighting campaign fell into that category. It was a gimmick masquerading as a campaign and it has generated a lot of community anger.



The NSPCA's official response...

The gimmick featured a billboard using mobile media advertising towed around some locations in Johannesburg to advertise a fake dogfight, the objective being to stir up anger and channel that anger into action. The creative used a cage-fighting theme and the Mixed Martial Arts association was at one time accused of being behind the gimmick.

Our role as marketing communicators is to spread ideas. In this case, to spread the idea that dog fighting is a growing problem that transcends socio-economic status and to alert people to act if they notice the signs of underground dog fights. The mechanism used was to make people angry and then drive them from passive activism to actually doing something, reporting or donating money.

The first question was, whom was it designed to anger? The people who already support the NSPCA and who would care that someone is advertising a dog fight? They are the people who would – and did – get angry. People who don't care would still not care and do nothing.

It was a major failure in execution not to have the telephone number and website active at launch. Unfortunately, many people went to a lot of trouble and wasted a lot of time and emotion to find the organisers behind the event and bring them to book, some even went as far as to threaten the driver of the vehicle with assault. Many of them are angry that they were duped: Even when they contact the NSPCA, instead of revealing the campaign they were told that the event was “being investigated”. Judging from reactions, many people are angry that they were tricked. It's never a good idea to alienate your supporters.

“ The [#DogFighting @NSPCA_SA](#) shock campaign is poorly executed, click-bait. It's neither clever nor will the real message be remembered!— AndrewRoss (@maddog_sa) [June 27, 2016](#) ”

Another Twitter user summed this up by saying: “A publicity stunt by the @NSPCA_SA. I hate blatant lies as much as people who harm animals. Such a waste of (good) people's time and energy.”

That's where the expression “cry wolf” comes from.

The next question is whether it was designed to create a conversation. The conversation I was able to find was about the campaign, not about dog fighting. That's patently useless. We don't want people talking about the campaign, we want people talking about dogfighting.

Because it's always easy to criticise campaigns, may I offer some suggestions of how it could have been improved? Starting from the brief, which was to raise awareness about illegal dogfighting. The budget was tiny.

- The first step in a campaign strategy could have been to try find all the people who care about dog fighting and to get them talking about it and converting others.
- Even using the same mobile billboard entry point, the NSPCA could have informed every animal welfare organisation and shelter and the SAPS about the campaign so that they could have informed anyone calling in about the campaign and its objectives.
- The website and call centre on that telephone number was available from the beginning so that every person going to the trouble of checking it out would have been explained the campaign empowered the caller to act.
- The NSPCA should not have untruthfully told people that the SPCA special investigation unit was investigating.
- The website could have been built as a resource centre for activists. It should have been loaded with content, facts, video, interviews etc that people could share in their activism.
- A hashtag on the billboard and the website would have tracked the interaction around the hashtag and established whom the activists are and their role in the online community.
- The activists could be recruited onto a database and had an email campaign empowering them with content to share.

In summary then, the dogfighting campaign represents a lost opportunity. It alienated the community it needs to have on its side, the conversation generated was not about the problem but about the campaign and unfortunately will, in my opinion, soon be forgotten.

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