



## Want to cut public spending? Spend more on advertising!

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Government is wasting billions on advertising and marketing. Large parts of the media, the Tax Payers Alliance and the Opposition will point to huge rises in spending over the last decade, and even before the fiscal crisis now facing government, were advocating substantial cuts. Central Office of Information (COI) spend rose by £29m (20%) in 2008. And if you add the Department of Transport's marketing spend with COI spend, total central government spend was the largest of **all** advertisers in the UK last year, at £195m. Surely any sensible person would demand that the government just gets on with its job and stop wasting money on messages that paper over the cracks of a "broken society"?

Well, not quite. Unfashionable, unpopular, and unpromising as it may sound, government advertising may be the cheapest and most efficient way of achieving its aims in addition to efficiencies and savings in public spending. Based on this, £195m could actually be a bargain. Let's ask the question: why should the government advertise in the first place? If we ignore departmental "promotion" and the cliché-ridden jargon that is acidulously monitored in *Private Eye*, then it comes down to one thing, and one thing only: to change behaviour – to make people behave differently (and hopefully for the better of themselves and mankind). Arguably, this is a "noble" aim and something worthwhile in itself. While the public are deeply divided over whether or not it is right for government to try and change people's behaviour, that is precisely what most laws are designed to do – to require people to do certain things, and stop them doing others.

Research after research demonstrates time and again the power and ability of advertising to change behaviour: whether it is in changing eating habits, changing behaviour, or building loyalty. Our work demonstrates that advertising, in the main, is one of the cheapest and most cost efficient ways of generating sales and growing/sustaining a profitable business. In many ways, the public should rejoice that the government spends money on advertising: it saves them money in the long-run. There is surely some truth in the COI's claim that the £21m Home Office crime reduction campaign has saved the criminal justice system £590m (or at least something towards that figure). Even if it saves only £22m, then surely it's worth doing, as a saving is made overall? In addition, recourse to legislation rather than advertising, has limitations within the fickleness of an increasingly irrational society where it is becoming harder to predict behaviour, and legislation may be the wrong tool to change it on its own; most legislation that seeks to do this has worked in conjunction with powerful communications campaigns, for example drink-driving, seat belt wearing and so on.

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There are numerous highly positive examples. Take the NHS anti-smoking campaign (“I’m scared of my mum smoking. I’m scared she might die”) which relies on a highly engaging “narrative” combined with the sudden turn at the end – the literal turning to camera combined with the sudden turn of the message, tapping into parental guilt through the shift into overt emotionality. If such an ad changes behaviour then there is an immediate saving in terms of the cost to the NHS of smoking-related illnesses, and is likely to be far more effective (and quick) than more legislation or imposing tax increases on cigarettes. The fact that cigarette advertising was banned says much for the government recognising the power of communications.

Or take the Stroke Association’s recent ad. Simple, effective, hugely striking and engaging. The “F.A.S.T.” acronym is easy to remember, and it is all given credibility by a voice-over from that recognisable (and liked) actress Sue Johnston. The outcome is that more people now know (if they didn’t already) how to recognise stroke symptoms, what to do, and how they should react. Could the government have done this in any other way? Should they? It’s very doubtful. If it shaves off the cost of the NHS by spending only around £1m, then the Return On Investment (ROI) sounds hugely reasonable. Could this have been achieved through legislation, or the setting-up of shiny new “Stroke Units”, or the beefing up of the NHS website? Maybe – but at what price?

Or think of the Benefit Fraud ads. You can’t move at the moment for dispiriting Mike Leigh-esque characters lurking in grey tracksuit bottoms, populating urban grit and decay, in a range of outdoor ads, each bearing the legend, “We’re closing in”. If this makes benefit fraudsters stop what they’re doing and reduces fraud then three cheers for that. At the very least, it’s cheaper than hiring people to stand in every post office fingerprinting anyone who looks suspicious. The other benefit obviously resides in reassuring the law-abiding majority that the government might actually be doing something about benefit fraud, making the daily commute a bit more bearable.

In many ways, the government should actually get **more** marketing savvy, not less. If the government listened more to marketers then they might be able to note how to nudge people into behaving in a certain way, rather than rely on legislation. It would be unpopular to say it, but government advertising, if done right, should, and often does save the country money while helping ensure we live in a better place.

The rules for government advertising? It’s easy: the same as for any other advertiser. Have your big idea, be creative, and communicate with clarity. Be credible, stick to your point, and have a clear message that is easily understood.

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