

CDC Zombie Apocalypse Campaign Analysis

With natural disasters and other emergencies not at the forefront of the minds of most Americans, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had to create a campaign that would bring awareness to emergency preparedness. What they came up with was creative yet risky, all while feeding off the pop culture phenomenon – Zombies.

Research

The CDC's Zombie Apocalypse campaign was vastly popular and went viral despite the lack of research that was conducted.

Identifying Issues

No formal research was conducted on either audience research or message testing; rather, the majority of what little research was done consisted of the history and popularity value of zombies. While there was little research, the CDC had a clear understanding of the challenges they had to overcome to encourage people to prepare for various emergencies. The communication team did not consider the possible outcomes when creating this campaign and did not anticipate the "long-lasting viral sensation [that] this campaign would become." ¹

Key Publics

The communications team decided to target a younger demographic, recognizing their prevalence in social media but did no additional research regarding their audience. When launching a social media campaign it is important to do research and to weigh all the possible outcomes that could come from your campaign. Despite lacking the precautionary research, the CDC identified the appropriate audience for their campaign.

Public Interest

In the past, their campaign efforts had remained boring and overlooked and they struggled to come up with a fresh idea that would captivate their audience despite being a topic that is so lackluster.

Communicators within the CDC agency acknowledged that the fastest and most effective way to communicate their content across a diverse public audience was through the use of social media.

¹ Kruvand, Marjorie, and Maggie Silver. "Zombies Gone Viral: How a Fictional Zombie Invasion Helped CDC Promote Emergency Preparedness." *Case Studies in Strategic Communication* 2 (2013): 35-55. Web. 24 Apr. 2014. <csscjournal.org>

The CDC communications team recalled the heavy activity that took place on their Twitter account, @CDCEmergency, after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear plant crisis occurred in Japan. After that disaster, they utilized their Twitter to ask the public which emergencies they were the most prepared for and to their surprise most stated “zombies.”²

The CDC identified and capitalized on the current phenomenon of zombies and built their campaign off of this common interest while still providing accurate and informative information.

Planning

The CDC Zombie Apocalypse campaign is interesting because of its huge success, despite having some major fundamental flaws. In terms of strategic planning, there were some definite failures and successes.

The majority of the mistakes made during the campaign occurred in the very beginning of the planning process. The argument could be made that the CDC did little to no initial planning at all. In an attempt to spice up a tired subject, “the communications team decided to use humor and pop-culture reference to bring more visibility to emergency preparedness.” (Kruvand & Silver, 2013)

Objectives

The CDC had only three main objectives:

1. Target a younger audience.
2. Reach them via social media.
3. Link preparedness messages with the popular zombie trend.

These objectives are not clear. Aside from raising awareness, there were no concrete informational, attitudinal or behavioral objectives stated in the plan.

The problem with this is there was no research conducted to substantiate or clarify any of these goals. Targeting a “younger audience” is vague and the team could have been more specific in clearly defining their audience. While using social media is a financially sound and resourceful decision, there was little evidence to support that social media was the best way to communicate with this audience.

Implementing the Plan

² Kruvand, Marjorie, and Maggie Silver. "Zombies Gone Viral: How a Fictional Zombie Invasion Helped CDC Promote Emergency Preparedness." *Case Studies in Strategic Communication* 2 (2013): 35-55. Web. 24 Apr. 2014. <csscjournal.org>

The guidelines for implementing the plan were very vague as well. The team decided that they would create a blog, make a Facebook post, tweet about it on Twitter and send a message to their GovDelivery listserv subscribers to communicate the information.³

The plan's timeline covered less than a week and only loosely suggested that they would expand the campaign if it proved to be successful. Additionally, virtually no evaluation methods were implemented to measure how effective the campaign was.

Communication

Despite the CDC's lack of research and planning, they excelled in the communication aspect. This campaign was based solely off of communication and the team utilized many different platforms of social media.

Media and Tactics

The CDC used the appropriate media platforms for their selected target audience. These platforms included:

- Twitter
- Facebook
- Blog posts

They kept the message consistent across all platforms and each medium was used to its greatest effect. This was mainly due to the response of the public. Without the public sharing the information the CDC provided, whether it was through reposts or word of mouth, the campaign wouldn't have been nearly as successful.

Limitations

Due to the communication teams low budget, social media proved to be their best option to relay their message. Initially, their only expense was \$87 to buy stock photos that were used in the blog post and throughout the campaign. After the campaign proved to be a success, they spent an additional \$20,000 on posters, post cards, and copies of the popular graphic novella.⁴

In this case, their budget limitations proved to not be a challenge at all. Because of their young demographic and the popularity of social media, their communication choice would have been successful with a limited budget or not.

³ Kruvand, Marjorie, and Maggie Silver. "Zombies Gone Viral: How a Fictional Zombie Invasion Helped CDC Promote Emergency Preparedness." *Case Studies in Strategic Communication* 2 (2013): 35-55. Web. 24 Apr. 2014. <csscjournal.org>

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Company Values

The CDC's mission is "Collaborating to create the expertise, information, and tools that people and communities need to protect their health – through health promotion, prevention of disease, injury and disability, and preparedness for new health threats."⁵

Even with a non-traditional campaign approach, the CDC stayed true to its mission statement and all decisions and actions that were made reflected the ideas of their mission. No laws, policies or regulations were broken during this campaign and all actions that were taken were consistent with their values and the values of public relations.

As the campaign gained momentum, more and more organizations wanted to collaborate with the CDC and its Zombie Apocalypse campaign. They were careful in choosing whom to associate themselves for fear of diminishing their credibility. "The CDC is the most credible source out there for public health information. You don't want to risk demeaning that" ⁶

Evaluation

Results

The results from the CDC's Zombie Apocalypse Campaign were far greater than they had expected. Over 4 million people have viewed the zombie posts on the CDC's blog, generating an influx of public comments and new traffic to their website and blog. Through relying on the use of satirical yet humorous messages to relay the emergency preparedness and planning message anchoring the campaign, the CDC was able to capitalize on the increasingly popular cultural phenomenon on zombies and use its bedrock mainstay amongst its target audience to attract potential new viewers to the CDC's website and blog and ultimately get people talking about preparedness for natural disasters and emergencies.

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The question that you must ask when evaluating this case is whether or not they increased the amount of individuals prepared for a natural disaster or emergency. During the research and situational analysis portion of the planning process, it would have been in the best interests of the CDC to have created a survey or polling tool to measure the level of preparedness or number of households that said they were prepared for a natural disaster

⁵ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2010a, January 11). *Vision, mission, core values, and pledge*. Retrieved April 8, 2013, from

⁶ Stobbe, M. (2011, May 20). CDC 'zombie apocalypse' advice an Internet hit. *Associated Press*.

or emergency before the campaign as well as afterwards. This would have contributed to the results from the campaign by providing qualitative data displaying the effectiveness of the campaign in addition to the CDC's mission of "Saving Lies. Protecting People."

Conclusion

Overall, this campaign was no doubt a success. Could they have conducted more research?
– Absolutely. While they could have done more research and put together a stronger, more concrete plan, the outcome may not have been any different because the actual result of this campaign was so positive.

The CDC did something unexpected yet completely inline with their audience's interests. They captured attentions and brought awareness to emergency preparedness, which after all, was their ultimate goal.