

SOLICITING DONATIONS WITH IMAGES OF CHILDREN: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CANADIAN CYSTIC FIBROSIS'S CAMPAIGN POSTERS

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Living in Montreal, I am completely reliant on public transit, specifically the metro system, for travel. Since 2008, many of the Montreal metro stations have displayed posters by the Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (CCFF) featuring the *Drowning on the Inside* advertising campaign (fig. 1). These posters feature a young child submerged in water, with only the top of his face resting above the surface. His mouth is open gasping for air. The first time I saw this poster I was caught off guard and extremely shocked by the visual imagery. Cystic fibrosis runs in my family, a fact that has influenced my strong emotional response to the *Drowning on the Inside* poster. Having significant previous knowledge of cystic fibrosis before viewing this poster, I questioned whether others who did not know anything about the disease would have a similar emotional response. This essay will explore advertising strategies used by CCFF to visually represent an invisible disability with their poster *Drowning on the Inside*, while simultaneously working to raise money and support.

The *Drowning on the Inside* poster reads, "Cystic fibrosis is like drowning on the inside. You cough. You gasp. Your lungs fill with fluid. Every breath is a struggle. That's how you live. And how you die (fig. 2)." The advertisement compares cystic fibrosis to an experience everyone can relate to: being in water, and breathing under water. This is a metaphor for the last stages of the disease. In contrast to past advertising campaigns, which used a series of images to raise awareness, the *Drowning on the Inside* poster uses a single repeated image to instill the message in the viewer's memory.

The *Drowning on the Inside* campaign photograph is taken from above, looking down at the child. Although a male child was photographed for the campaign, his gender is not overtly obvious. The child appears to be precariously floating just above the surface of the water, staring upwards at the camera. His face is located in the center of the image and takes up the majority of the picture plane. The viewer cannot avoid looking directly into the child's eyes. We stand in a position of power above the child, yet are unable to offer assistance. The black and white photograph emphasizes the contrast of light and dark. The child's face is illuminated by light, while the dark depths of the water are consumed in shadow. The advertisement compares the darkness of the water, with death.

Recently, an article titled "Raising Money for Cystic Fibrosis: At what Price?" was published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* criticizing the *Drowning on the Inside* campaign. The author Dr. Annie Janvier, a neonatologist and clinical ethicist working at Sainte-Justine Hospital in Montreal, states, "the goals achieved with the money raised are not worth the misinformation and the harm done to vulnerable patients and their families."¹ Although the ads are targeted to the general public, children who have cystic fibrosis undoubtedly see them. If these posters do cause harm, as Janvier attests, why did the CCFF choose to publish them?

June Perotti, the director of communications for CCFF has noted, "Creating an ad campaign is a huge challenge. The foundation is very mindful of how families affected by CF receive a campaign message. They are designed with a lot of care. The advertising is aimed at people who don't know about CF, but you can't shield people who have CF from seeing the ads."²

Before advertisements are released to the public, the Board of Directors of CCFF must approve them. Following approval, the ads are overviewed by a group of people, which, in the past, has included parents of children with cystic fibrosis, adults with cystic fibrosis, as well as doctors, nurses and directors of cystic fibrosis clinics within Canada. It is only after campaign advertisements have been reviewed and critiqued by these groups that they can be displayed in the public realm.³

In May 2008, before the *Drowning on the Inside* campaign was released to the public, Debra Berlet and René Coutu, two board members of CCFF, as well as parents of children with cystic fibrosis released a letter from the foundation detailing their support of the advertisements. The letter states: “We have tried very hard to strike a balance between a message of urgency and one of hope. Too much hope suggests that we don’t need help. Too much urgency negates advances that have been made in cystic fibrosis research and care.”⁴ Additionally they note, “Our strategy is to create empathy, an emotional impact, and to let viewers know that their support can make a difference.”⁵

It is impossible to please everyone with advertising campaigns. There will always be those who do not agree with the advertising strategies used, and there will always be those who support the strategies used. Recently I asked my sister for her opinion of the *Drowning on the Inside* campaign. As a 17-year old patient with cystic fibrosis she believes that the single image campaign is successful in raising awareness of the disease. Although she recalled that she did feel alarmed upon first encountering the poster in the Montreal metro, it did not disrupt her day. She said that she supports the ad campaign, and does not think that positive advertising strategies would be as effective in raising awareness.

In a blog entry posted online on September 22, 2010, Todd Dow, the father of a young CF child living in Beamsville Ontario, discusses his response to the negative criticism leveled against the *Drowning on the Inside* campaign by Janvier in her article “Raising money for cystic fibrosis: At what price?” Todd notes on his blog titled “Breathing as a Family,” about the video commercial for the *Drowning on the Inside* campaign: “As a parent of a child with CF, I was horrified the first time I saw this ad. Others close to our family are unable to watch the ad. Most days, we do well to put it out of our minds, hoping that a cure will arrive before the disease progresses to a point of no return.”⁶ Although he may not personally like the *Drowning on the Inside* campaign, Dow acknowledges that it constructs a powerful image. He says, “I don’t know about you, but, I’m willing to tolerate a bit of debate over the accuracy of the ads if it means additional awareness.”⁷

The use of fear as an advertising strategy is not a new development in marketing. The advertising agency Northwords Company Limited and Urban & Co. Inc. who created the *Drowning on the Inside* campaign image have also created advertisements for other companies that elicit a response of fear from the viewer. An example of this is an advertisement for Lipitor, a cholesterol-lowering calcium medication (fig. 3). The advertisement features the slogan, “Which would you rather have, a cholesterol test or a final exam.” The poster’s image is a close up of the feet of a dead cadaver on a medical examiners table. The tag attached to the large toe notes that the man was middle age, of average weight, yet died of a heart attack.

For many people the *Drowning on the Inside* poster may create emotions of fear for the child’s well-being and future. The poster elicits fear indirectly, on behalf of another person, in an attempt to induce a negative emotional response from the viewer, which is then internalized as empathy.⁸ Here empathy can be defined as “the heightened awareness of another person in danger or distress and

includes an urge to take action to alleviate the other person's plight."⁹ An empathetic response can lead to helping the subject of an advertisement.¹⁰

In their article "A Content Analysis of Guilt Appeals in Popular Magazine Advertisements" Bruce Huhmann and Timmothy Brotherton note, "A fear appeal might result in a purchase that increases control over a situation or prevents an unwanted outcome."¹¹ There is no cure for cystic fibrosis, yet people are able to contribute financially to the foundation and support research towards finding a cure. For many, guilt may be a side effect of failure to support. "Guilt appeals can be influential in modifying consumer behavior because guilt is the primary motivational factor in mature conscience."¹² The public has the power to contribute to non-profit organizations like CCFF. Posters like *Drowning on the Inside* remind the public that the children depicted are dependant on advances in medicine for life.

Richard Bagozzi, and David Moore's article *Public Service Advertisements: Emotions and Empathy Guide Prosocial Behavior*, discusses the effect of negative advertising strategies, including fear and guilt, in advertisements about children's abuse. Similar to poster ads from the CCFF, the advertisements discussed in Bagozzi and Moore's article depict images of children that are used to elicit an emotional response from the viewer. The authors note that "exposure to the ads featuring the child leads to appraisals of distress and danger for the child; this then provides the negative emotion of anger, sadness, fear and tension; and the viewer copes with the negative affect through empathic responses and decision to help."¹³

For non-profit organizations the goal is to reach the largest number of people as possible. Advertisements that have a hard-hitting message cause the viewer to have strong emotional response.¹⁴ "High-impact ads that evoke strong emotions and stimulate empathy could require fewer exposures yet be successful in influencing attitude formation and decision making."¹⁵ However, Bagozzi and Moore warn that over time the use of a high-impact advertisement, that creates negative responses, could eventually result in negative feelings towards the image itself and/or organization.¹⁶

Why do the ads from CCFF only feature children and not adults? According to the Foundation's website, "in the 1960's most children with cystic fibrosis did not live long enough to attend kindergarten."¹⁷ Now, with advances in medicine: "Today half of all Canadians with cystic fibrosis are expected to live into their 40s and beyond."¹⁸ As well, today "the number of Canadian adults with cystic fibrosis (aged 18+) surpasses the number of children with CF."¹⁹

The fact that CF is a genetic disease effecting children from birth, distinguishes it from many other disabilities. Images of children often represent innocence, and are strong motivating factors for adults to engage in action. The wellbeing of a child is relatable and of interest to most people. Furthermore, ads from CCFF not only have to compete with other fundraising advertising from other non-profit organizations, but they must also compete with advertisements selling consumer products. In the Montreal metro systems, where these posters are currently and frequently displayed, the foundation competes for attention beside ads for Apple iPods, museum exhibitions, and various other ads for consumer goods.

The CCFF's advertising campaign before *Drowning on the Inside* was called *Breath is Life* (figs. 4 & 5). This series of colour images ran from May 2004 until April 2008 and featured young children in a variety of environments, their bodies deflated, lying dead against the floor. This metaphor encapsulates the poor lung function and difficulty breathing experienced by many children with cystic fibrosis. Similar

to the *Drowning on the Inside* advertisement, these posters did not feature real children with cystic fibrosis.

Before the *Breath is Life* advertising campaign, the CCF's advertising posters featured black and white photographs of real children with cystic fibrosis. Each ad included a high-impact slogan about the child. The Holly & Cassandra poster which ran from 1997 until 2000, featured a mother and her daughter, a child with CF (fig. 6). The poster's slogan written in white text against the black background reads "Imagine knowing your child will die before you do." A poster featuring Celine Dion and a child with cystic fibrosis ran from 1994 until 1996 (fig. 7). This poster speaks of a need for donations and reads, "To a child with cystic fibrosis your help is a special miracle." The ad campaign in 1989 featured a child named Mathew, and the slogan "Mathew has everything a four year old could ask for. And something no one would want (fig. 8)." In 1987, the poster of a young girl named Julia read, "Julia is 12 years old. She just reached middle age (fig. 9)." All of these posters provide close-ups of the children's faces. They look directly at the viewer with large eyes, imploring the public for help.

The *Drowning on the Inside* campaign poster and video, as well as the numerous other posters from the CCF, are examples of how one organization has worked to visually portray an invisible illness to a public with little knowledge of the disease. Although I still have a strong emotional response to these posters whenever I walk by them in the metro, I believe they are successful in raising awareness about the disease. Many patients experience cystic fibrosis with differing levels of severity. The Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation's advertising posters do not display a complete picture of cystic fibrosis. It is a much more complicated disease than the images depict. However, a single poster would be unable to capture the attention of the viewer while simultaneously providing thorough and complete information about the disease. Numerous patients with CF support the campaign, and the high-impact photograph depicted on the *Drowning on the Inside* poster ensures that many Canadians internalize awareness about the severity of the disease.

FIGURES



FIG. 1

Drowning on the Inside. Advertisement. 2008-today.

(Image: <http://denis-au-quebec.ublog.com/mon_weblog/2008/05/184---pub-choc.html>)



FIG. 2

Drowning on the Inside. Advertisement. 2008-today. (Image:

<<http://www.cysticfibrosis.ca/en/aboutUs/advertising.php>>)

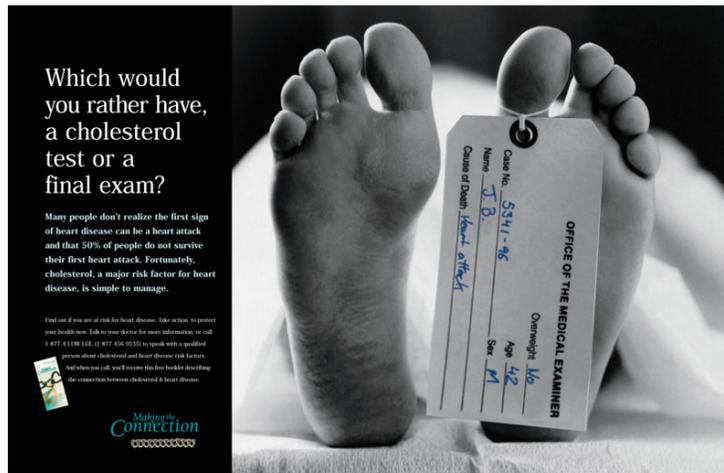


FIG. 3

Lipitor. Advertisement. (Image: <<http://www.northwordsurban.com/>>)



FIG. 4

Breath is Life. Advertisement. 2004-2008.

(Image: Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation Digital Archives)



FIG. 5

Breath is Life. Advertisement. 2004-2008.

(Image: Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation Digital Archives)

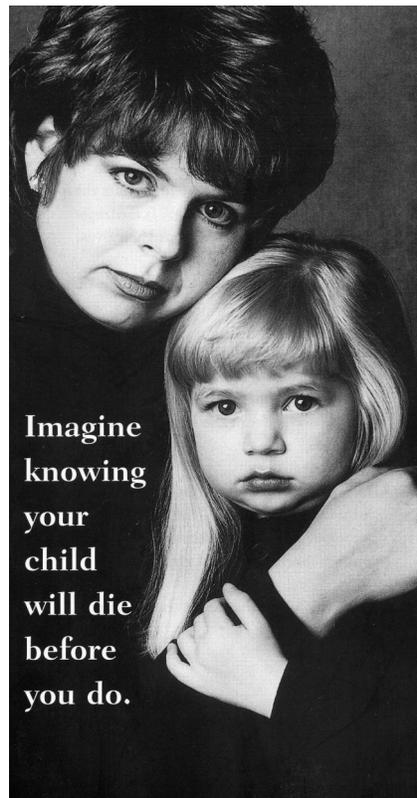


FIG. 6

Holly & Cassandra. Advertisement. 1997-2000.

(Image: Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation Digital Archives)

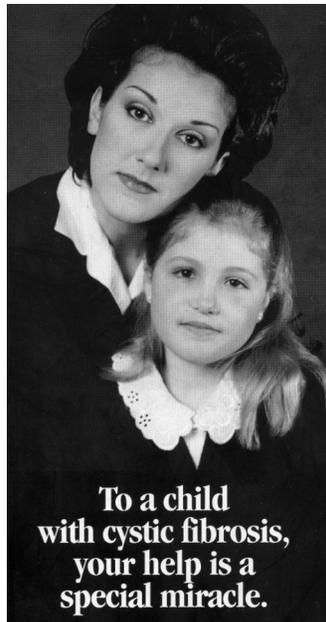


FIG. 7

Celine Dion and a child. Advertisement. 1994-1996.

(Image: Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation Digital Archives)

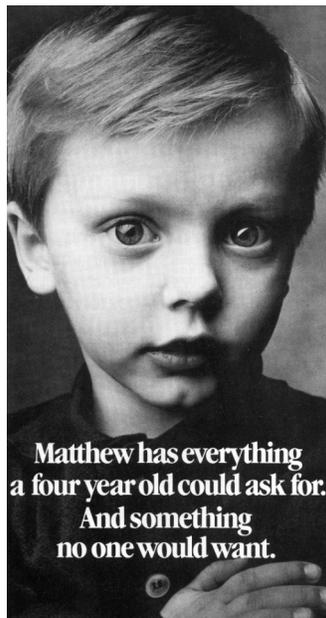


FIG. 8

Matthew. Advertisement. 1989.

(Image: Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation Digital Archives)



FIG. 9

Julia. Advertisement. 1987. (Image: <<http://www.northwordsurban.com>>)

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Annie Janvier, "Raising Money For Cystic Fibrosis: At What Price?" *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 13 July 2010.
- ² Roger Collier, "The Fear Factor in Health Fundraising," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (16 Aug. 2010) 1.
- ³ Nathan Fish, and Karen Gliddon, "Advertising campaigns for cystic fibrosis," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (5 Oct. 2010): 182 (14).
- ⁴ Debra Berlet, and René Coutu, "National Advertising Campaign, May 2008-April 2011: Information for the CF Community," Letter from the Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, May 2008.
- ⁵ Berlet and Coutu.
- ⁶ Todd Dow, "Breathing as a Family: Our Story of Living with Cystic Fibrosis," CF in the news: "The fear factor in health fundraising" in *CMAJ* (Aug. 2010) <<http://breathingasafamily.org/>>.
- ⁷ Dow.
- ⁸ Richard Bagozzi, and David Moore, "Public Service Advertisements: Emotions and Empathy Guide Prosocial Behavior," *The Journal of Marketing* 58:1 (Jan. 1994): 56.
- ⁹ Bagozzi and Moore, 59.
- ¹⁰ Bagozzi and Moore, 56.
- ¹¹ Bruce A. Huhmann, and Timothy P. Brotherton, "A Content Analysis of Guilt Appeals in Popular Magazine Advertisements," *Journal of Advertising* 26:2 (Summer 1997): 37.
- ¹² Huhmann and Brotherton, 36.
- ¹³ Bagozzi and Moore, 67.
- ¹⁴ Bagozzi and Moore, 68.
- ¹⁵ Bagozzi and Moore, 68.
- ¹⁶ Bagozzi and Moore, 68.
- ¹⁷ "About Cystic Fibrosis: The Canadian Facts & Figures on Cystic Fibrosis," Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (July 2010) <<http://www.cysticfibrosis.ca/en/aboutCysticFibrosis/CfStatistics.php>>.
- ¹⁸ "About Cystic Fibrosis."
- ¹⁹ "About Cystic Fibrosis."

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