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## PSAs go primetime during downturn

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*Time slots for public service announcements gain in quality and quantity*

Think the only time you'll see a "stop smoking" or "save the earth" commercial is when you're watching TV at 3 a.m.? Thanks to lower broadcast ad inventory (ditto for print), there appear to be more opportunities to get your public service announcement in front of people who don't necessarily have insomnia.

New York's [West Glen Communications](#), a producer and distributor of public service campaigns, recently did its own study of the placements its TV and radio PSAs received during 2008. Only about one-third of the announcements aired between 1 and 5 a.m., when people think most PSAs are broadcast. Another third of the PSAs aired between 9 and 10 p.m., certainly a respectable time for nonprofits to be delivering their messages, says [West Glen](#) senior VP Annette Minkalis.

"This takes some air out of the myth that PSAs only air in the wee hours," Minkalis notes, adding that about half of the TV and radio airings took place in the top 50 markets.

Other broadcast industry professionals see anecdotal evidence that PSAs are getting more play and more prominence.

"More placements and better placements" are the order of the day for spots produced by the [Ad Council](#), says Tim Davis, its executive VP of media.

"Given the decline in paid ads, we're benefiting," Davis says. "We're getting better day placements," instead of seeing the majority of placements in the middle of the night.

And Lynn Harris Medcalf, executive VP of [News Generation](#), a Bethesda, Md., PR firm specializing in radio, also sees a quantity and quality boost for her clients' PSA time slots.

"There's more airtime freed up since not as many ads are running," says Medcalf.

Media outlets would rather run PSAs than house ads or station promos, says Susan Somers, founder of [FM Marketing and PR](#) in Las Vegas.

“The radio stations air the PSAs because it sounds better than over-running station promos,” Somers says. “Doubling commercials just makes the station sound like they’re selling the spots too cheap.”

However, this doesn’t mean that all nonprofits are reaping the benefits of weak demand for paid advertising. In fact, Santa Fe-based [Betsy Model](#), who specializes in PR for nonprofits, says the ad downturn means her clients are being pressured to make buys.

“When the nonprofits are requesting PSAs, they’re often getting hit up pretty hard to buy some paid advertising,” says Model. “They’ll get the inevitable follow-up call from a sales person or sales manager requesting a paid ad space equivalent, or offering a discounted rate — but it’s still connected to an invoice-for-placement.”

However, Model says that when her clients *do* get placements, their PSAs are airing in more viewer-friendly time slots.

In the opinion of Margaret Wilesmith, president of [Wilesmith Advertising/Design](#) in West Palm Beach, Fla., buying ad time is the *only* way to get decent placement for your PSA.

“No nonprofit advertiser can depend on the frequency of PSAs that you need to penetrate your market,” says Wilesmith. “We’re buying air time for our not-for-profit clients, but we’re also leveraging media partners for quality PSAs — meaning no 3 a.m. showings.”

When you’re shelling out money, says Wilesmith, you can demand better PSA placement. “The freebies are going to the paying clients first,” she explains.

### More ways to avoid those 3 a.m. placements

Even if PSA scheduling is loosening up a bit, there’s still plenty of competition for space. What can you do to boost the odds that your PSA is chosen — and that it airs when people are still awake?

**Insist on stellar production values:** Rozanne Weissman, senior director of consumer campaigns for the [Alliance to Save Energy](#) in Washington, D.C., has had substantial success creating and distributing energy-related PSAs (see the “Super Powers” and “Static Electricity House” PSAs [here](#)). The key, she says, is high-end production, especially for TV — stations don’t want to air amateurish video.

“You’re in competition with top-notch advertisers,” says Weissman. “And you have to be competitive with what’s in the marketplace.”

**Pitch in advance:** In a 2007 survey of PSA directors at radio stations, News Generation found that all of them want to get pitched before they get your PSA. “Pre-pitching allows station staff to know what public service announcements are available and plan [the] rotation accordingly. It also allows the organization pitching the PSA to have a gauge on the number and types of stations that plan to use the information,” according to the survey.

**Localize:** Regional radio news directors like local pegs to their PSAs, says News Generation’s Medcalf. If your national pitch has some local components – events, for example – make them a prominent part of the pitch, and target the right local media outlets.

**Create custom campaigns if possible:** The Ad Council’s Davis says his organization often talks to local media outlets and public affairs directors about hometown issues that could be highlighted in PSAs.

For instance, conversations with TV and radio stations in Detroit led to the creation of PSAs about foreclosure prevention; in Texas, the Ad Council created PSAs about fighting childhood obesity. If your organization’s scope is broad enough, you may find ways to customize your campaigns.