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Anti-Drug Advertisement Strategy: Targeting with Fear

The first few moments of a serious injury can be terrifying. Information is not available, and even pain has not come yet... but it will. With the true extent of the damage still unknown, adrenalin charges the brain into a hyper-aware state and many horrible possibilities are considered in a split second. Will I be scarred? Am I crippled? Will I die? This moment of primal fear is what the Office of National Drug Control Policy and the Partnership for a Drug-Free America seek to evoke in their “Regret” advertisement on page 408 of *Joining the Conversation* (Palmquist). They draw upon the most basic survival instincts of their teenage audience – fear of that which can harm you, and the critical need for alertness in the presence of danger.

The ad itself is simple enough. A pair of blood-splattered safety goggles sits on a table against a dark green background. In the top right corner a block of stark white text reads, “You got high before shop class. You thought you could handle the saw. You were wrong. Weed can make you do stupid things like that.” This text explicates the link between drug use and the bloody goggles, while the tagline, “Regret, the Anti-Drug,” is presented in the bottom right corner. This seemingly simple arrangement belies multiple deliberate compositional elements.

Several facets of this ad identify its target audience as non-drug using teenagers. The age group being targeted is revealed by the reference to “shop class.” This reference really only makes sense in the context of a junior high or high school. Despite the broad emotional appeal, two facts reveal that this ad is not directed towards individuals with established patterns of drug use. The first fact is the stern manner of the reprimanding text – reminiscent of a scolding parent. It is unlikely that a teenager who is

already heavily involved in illegal behavior would be receptive to negative feedback from an authority figure. The second fact is the reasoning of the argument presented. Most students with a long history of drug use would have personal experience without the dire consequences portrayed in this ad. This experience could weaken the implied cause/effect relationship between marijuana and the hazard depicted.

The first visual element of this ad's design is the use of the green background against the lighter yellow tabletop. This choice of colors creates a very sharp, high-contrast line where the two areas meet. The viewer's gaze is immediately drawn to this colorful contrast. Even though the goggles are the only focal object in the ad, their transparent construction deemphasizes their visual importance relative to the compelling juxtaposition of green on yellow in the backdrop. The reduced visual weight of the goggles forces the viewer to take a moment before focusing attention on the blood running down the lenses. This brief delay helps to ensure a distinct moment of ghastly realization. Once the blood has been noticed, the ad's true insinuation becomes clear.

The understated drop of blood does not induce the shock that one might feel upon experiencing a horrific accident. Instead, it relies on the intangible implication of what *might* have happened. While there are no direct indications of the severity of the incident, a few subtle clues suggest it was grave. A spray of blood across a person's face seems inconsistent with a minor cut. Goggles have been cast aside and forgotten, blood has been left to dry. All this hints at a crisis more pressing than the menial task of cleaning up a mess. Without specifics, the viewer is left to imagine a nightmare scenario; inserting their own worst fears.

After the viewer has had an opportunity to register the blood, it seems reasonable that he or she would begin seeking additional clues to the ad's intended message. At this point, the emotional context having been set, the ad shifts to its secondary logical appeal.

Since attention is focused on the lower half of the picture, a natural progression would be to the heavy, black letters located near the current focal point. "Regret, the Anti-Drug" clearly establishes the accident's cause but leaves open the question of "how did this happen?" This final question is answered by the text at the top of the page.

This main block of text offers a harsh admonition of drug-users' inability to exhibit basic precepts of self-preservation. The abilities to remain aware and properly recognize threats are alleged to be compromised by the use of marijuana. Callous words like "wrong" and "stupid" ensure that the viewer understands that excuses will not mitigate consequences, and sympathy will not be shown. The choice of words is also tailored to speak to the intended audience by both mirroring the vernacular of teenagers and the anticipated response from angry parents.

The National Office of Drug Control Policy and the Partnership for a Drug-Free America have crafted their "Regret" advertisement to specifically reach out to a younger audience. Acknowledging that youth often lack personal experience with long-term consequences, this ad relies on pathos of instinctual fear. Visual elements have been arranged within the ad to help guide viewers through the process of first recognizing potential consequences, then attributing a cause of drug use to those consequences. This ad serves as a clear example of how agencies attempt to compel changes in our behavior through both emotion and reason.

Work Cited

Palmquist, Mike. *Joining the Conversation*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010. Print.