

# Campaigning for change in social campaigns

BY ANG SWEE HOON  
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

**T**HE current advertisement on filial piety, where this virtue is emphasised despite the unreasonable matriarch, was excellent in garnering attention. It touched a raw nerve and drew a deluge of opposing views.

As a social campaign ad, it has come a long way from what conventional social ads are – not only was it sleek in production, it was heartrending, memory-evoking with the Hokkien song and aroused interest in what would otherwise be considered a “non-exciting” topic.

Singapore has learnt the art of social campaigns more so than other countries. Beyond anti-drinking and anti-smoking campaigns, Singapore’s campaigns boast a myriad of themes including anti-littering, save water, use your hands, be more courteous, plant trees, speak Mandarin, anti-dengue, flush the toilet, family planning and family procreation.

There are so many that chances are, you name it, we’ve got it.

The initial campaigns began in the 1960s. With human resource as its only natural resource, the Government attempted to mould and shape this resource in ways that would help towards nation building. Posters in post offices used to state that men with long hair would be served last. Hippie men with long hair were not consistent with the image of well-mannered, law-abiding citizens, and hence, were accorded fewer privileges. This was the start of many social campaigns to come.

Along the similar objective of nation



**This recent TV ad about a son’s devotion to his difficult-to-please mother has drawn controversy over the issue of filial piety.** PHOTO: MINISTRY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH AND SPORTS

building, the anti-littering campaign, with its famous “Keep Singapore Clean” slogan, inculcates Singaporeans with a sense of national pride to keep the country clean, boost tourism and generate revenue. Similarly, the kindness movement aimed to shape the people’s sense of civil behaviour – behaviour that promotes harmonious working together.

Many non-Singaporeans find it strange that people need to be reminded by the Government to be courteous, and are even more astounded that we accept such governmental influence and messages without much second thought.

The truth is that we are a nation that

relies extensively on labour from varied migrant backgrounds and ethnic make-up. In such a milieu, courtesy is a social glue that binds the population.

A good social campaign cannot be run like traditional commercial campaigns. Unlike tangible products that can be seen and touched, social ideas are abstract. For instance, a TV set can be tested for its resolution and sound quality before purchase. But it’s almost impossible to sample the benefits of an idea until it is implemented. And even then, the benefits may not be immediate but apparent only in the long term.

Buying into some social ideas requires

a leap of faith. While the dangers of mosquito breeding in the anti-dengue campaign are obvious, the benefits of other social campaigns are less apparent. Why can’t I litter? Why should I have more children? Why should I speak more Mandarin at the expense of another language?

Perhaps such a mindset explains why, despite stiff financial penalties and Corrective Work Orders, the number of littering cases is still on the rise.

Hence, the rationale for social campaigns has to be communicated clearly and consistently, with benefits distilled and crystallised for the public to understand and accept.

There will always be differences in opinion, but so long as the reasons forwarded are sensible and logical, credibility is harnessed. And if the campaign treats the audience with respect, half the battle is won.

However, some credibility can be lost when social campaigns appear to contradict each other. Confusion is created and credibility shot. There have been a few of these in Singapore.

The most noted is the one on family planning and then the turnabout family procreation campaign some 10 to 20 years later.

There is also the save precious water campaign followed some years later by the flush toilet campaign.

In the former case, the Government has acknowledged its error in curbing family size. Humility in acknowledging mistakes is one step towards winning people over to the revised message of having bigger families.

In the latter case, distilling the differences between the saving water and flush-

ing toilets campaigns – how the circumstances surrounding these campaigns have changed – will help towards reconciling the seeming contradiction.

One of the concerns in marketing is the tedium or worn-out factor. Audiences may tire of a campaign after having seen it several times. The courtesy or kindness movement campaign is run every year, as is the Speak Mandarin campaign, though with variations in theme and target audience.

These campaigns may not garner the same level of interest as when they were first launched, but have become part of what is uniquely Singapore.

Social campaigns have a role to play in a society that is collectivistic and paternalistic, and stresses consideration for the views of others. They are akin to an elder person teaching a young person how to behave. However, such campaigns may become less effective as people become more individualistic and when distinctions between seniority and subordination become less clear.

One reason the filial piety ad drew so much controversy is that Singaporeans are now more willing to stand by their own views and not be socialised into how to behave. Exerting social values becomes more challenging. Thus, by generating controversy, the filial piety ad ignites passion for this issue. By first stating its stance and then allowing the public to debate the issue of filial piety, the Government is not only giving Singaporeans a voice but is also letting social influence take its indirect course through such discussion.

Social campaigns will need to take a different tack to remain relevant to the evolving society. It appears that society wants a voice in these campaigns too. The journey to master the art of social campaigning continues.

**The writer is associate professor in the department of marketing, NUS Business School.**