

## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

## Agencies Must Advance in Health Care Messaging by Practicing Empathy

Authoritative marketing is a turn-off for those who need help the most



Patients respond best to health care messaging that is inviting and warm. Bill Oxford/Getty Images



By **Emmy Liederman**

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Shannon Ashe is not looking to end drug use. Instead, the licensed social worker has set out to eradicate overdoses. And in an industry that has historically shunned individuals who struggle with recovery, she is determined to offer a warmer approach. According to Ashe, fear of being shamed is one of the main reasons people don't seek treatment.

"I had a participant tell me that I was the first therapist that didn't make them feel worse when they had a relapse," said Ashe, who is the co-founder of harm reduction organization The Everywhere Project. "Patients are often told that they are failures if they're not sober or that they just didn't plan well enough."

The Everywhere Project's social media reflects the warmth that Ash exudes in her practice. The organization took a play on Little Miss Sunshine with "Little Miss Harm Reduction," sells tie dye Narcan storage pouches and has a website riddled with floral and pastel infographics. Skulls and crossbones and unsettling statistics are nowhere to be found.

defined by strict doctors' orders and authoritative messaging, which often takes the form of statistic-based advertisements that come with some sort of shock element or scare tactic. But encouraging behavioral change can only be done by driving empathy. **Studies have shown** that health professionals with higher levels of empathy are more successful in encouraging therapeutic change, which results in better health outcomes for patients. And as more providers put their patients in the driver's seat, agencies in the health care space must reflect these changes in their messaging by offering support and guidance that is free of shame.



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According to Nick Dutnall, managing partner at London-based agency BBD Perfect Storm, nudging patients to take action, rather than demanding they do, allows them to feel that they are taking more control over their own health, which then leads to change.

"If facts and figures were enough, no one would smoke," said Dutnall. "We are rehumanizing health care and realizing that data isn't enough. You need emotion."

## Reducing blame

There is a shift in health care marketing in which marketers are recognizing and trying to address systemic societal flaws as opposed to shaming the people that are affected by them.

The documentary *Black Lives, Black Lungs* taps into these issues by investigating how the tobacco industry has historically targeted the Black community, specifically when it comes to menthol cigarettes. Lincoln Mondy, deputy head of media and campaigns at Black-owned creative agency A—B, was inspired to create the documentary after completing a fellowship at tobacco control nonprofit Truth Initiative.

## Black Lives Black Lungs



**(Captions for the video have not been made available to Adweek. We will update the video once captions have been provided.)** Lincoln Mondy

This approach, which places blame on predatory marketing instead of the individual user, is a common theme at Truth Initiative. Last September, agency Mojo Supermarket introduced "**The Depression Stick**," a campaign that focuses on the negative effects of vaping on mental health. Young adults are invited to sign up for a texting platform that helps them quit, which includes tips from others going through the process. When the bot

500,000 young people.

## Adagency

**(Captions for the video have not been made available to Adweek. We will update the video once captions have been provided.)** Mojo Supermarket, The Truth Initiative

"A lot of campaigns put the onus on the teenager," said Mojo Supermarket co-head of strategy Ryan McDaid. "You hear it on the news that vaping is a teen epidemic. But it's not the teenager's fault—it's the culture's fault. It's the industry's fault."

Following a three-month research process, Jesse Kates, evp and managing director at IPG Health Network Company NEON, was determined to help **domestic violence** victims find a way out. His agency put up over 330 billboards nationwide that contain the words "Are you living in fear of the next 'I'm Sorry?'" The billboard then directs consumers to [thelastimsorry.com](https://thelastimsorry.com), which is a hub of resources for people who need help.

To address the issue of domestic violence empathetically, Kates and his team had to think about all the reasons someone may stay in a dangerous relationship. The website contains a safe search feature that accounts for victims who may have someone watching their every move, and an OOH approach was intentionally used for safety reasons.

"People could see it without being blamed for looking at it," said Kates, who shared the campaign has driven 4,200 unique visits as of last month and a 2,000% increase in views on its partnering organizations' platforms, Safe In Harms Way and Domestic Shelters.







NEON

## Putting in the work

Hilary Gentile, president of IPG health company 90North, uses an empathy engine to understand the reasons in which patients don't take action to better their health. The engine takes qualitative research from doctors, patients and nurses to understand the pain points that are **stopping people from going to see a physician** or taking their medication. Instead of scolding patients, the agency wants to understand why they are not taking action, which allows the shop to craft messages that are warmer and more welcoming. According to Gentile, diving into this type of research is crucial when figuring out how to encourage change.

"Authoritative marketing forces you into a directive that you should be doing something," she said. "When you help people make their own decisions, that comes with a certain self-motivation. We're really trying to understand what people are going through and what is plaguing them in their quest to improve their health."



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**EMMY LIEDERMAN**

@emmyliederman   
 emmy.liederman@adweek.com

Emmy is an Adweek staff writer covering agencies, influencers and the creator economy.

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