

Wildfire Prevention



Overview

Sporting a ranger hat and dungarees, Smokey Bear has become more than a symbol for protecting America's forests from human-caused wildfires – he's a piece of Americana. Smokey Bear has been the longest running public service advertising campaign in history, first appearing seventy years ago in a wildfire prevention poster in 1944. In partnership with the USDA Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters, the Ad Council and advertising agency Foote Cone & Belding (now FCB) created Smokey Bear to raise awareness about wildfire prevention. Seventy years later, Smokey Bear remains a highly recognizable and relevant American symbol.

Consistently ranked as one of the Ad Council's top performers in donated media, and almost universally recognized by American adults, the Wildfire Prevention campaign featuring Smokey Bear has helped to reduce areas burned by wildfires from 22 million acres in 1944 to approximately 6.7 million annually today.

For seven decades, Smokey's message has stayed the same – be responsible when you use fire. But as with all Ad Council campaigns, the Wildfire Prevention campaign has been continuously refreshed and re-evaluated. Beginning in 2008, the campaign expanded Smokey's presence by reintroducing him with a new, modern look and an integrated communications strategy that incorporated social media to strengthen engagement with the campaign's current target audience, young adults 18-34. In the years since, the campaign has continued to keep his image fresh and has also broadened his reach to school children throughout the nation with multimedia teaching resources.

Campaign Objective

Renew the importance of wildfire prevention by creating awareness of the causes and consequences of wildfires, ultimately reducing the number of human-caused wildfires.

Target:

- Primary: Adults 18 – 34
- Secondary: Young adults 18 – 24, elementary school-aged children

Key Message: Your actions can prevent a wildfire more than you think.

Donated Media: over \$1.4 billion since 1980

Framing the Issue

When the Wildfire Prevention campaign first launched, the Ad Council, then called the War Advertising Council, had recently created the now famous "Loose Lips Sink Ships" campaigns and was looking to expand its ability to change public behavior in times of peace. One of the first non-war campaigns began in 1944 when the Ad Council began a pro bono partnership with advertising agency Foote Cone & Belding (now FCB) to create the Wildfire Prevention public service advertising campaign. The first forest fire prevention campaign poster featured Walt Disney's Bambi, but was loaned to the campaign for only one year. It was decided later that year that the nation's number one fire prevention symbol should be a bear.

In the early 1940s before Smokey was created, over 22 million acres were burned annually because of human-caused wildfires. That's the equivalent of burning nearly the entire state of Indiana each year. This led the U.S. Forest Service, the National Association of State Foresters and the Ad Council to begin the campaign to raise awareness about the simple precautions people can take to help protect America's forests, grasslands, and other areas from fire.

Since the beginning, the campaign has aimed to empower people with the knowledge that they can prevent wildfires, working to build a sense of personal responsibility for wildfire prevention and to inform the American public that human carelessness is the primary cause of wildfires.

Evolution of an Icon

Smokey Bear was created on August 9, 1944. His first forest fire prevention poster was illustrated by Albert Staehle. The poster depicted Smokey pouring a bucket of water on an unattended camp fire with the message, “Smokey says – Care will prevent 9 out of 10 forest fires.”

In 1947, Smokey's tagline changed to, “Remember – only you can prevent forest fires.” This iconic tagline has since become part of the American vernacular and been referenced in countless mediums. In 2001, “forest fires” changed to “wildfires” to stress that all unwanted, accidental fires in natural areas, including grass and brush fires, should be prevented.

In 1952, Congress passed the Smokey Bear Act that removed the character from the public domain and placed his image under control of the USDA Forest Service. That same year, songwriters Steve Nelson and Jack Rollins wrote and released the famous song, “Smokey the Bear.” In order to make the rhythm of the song work, a “the” was added to his name; however, Smokey Bear's name has never included “the.”

Also during this time, the production of Smokey Bear dolls and kid-friendly advertisements were developed to appeal to children so that they could learn their role in wildfire prevention at a young age. In the decades since, Smokey continues to teach kids how to prevent wildfires. Teachers use Smokey and his message in the classroom, and Smokey still makes appearances in schools and hands out awards to kids that help him with wildfire prevention.

Smokey's image and message have been featured in communications that span virtually every medium; from TV, radio, print, and outdoor advertisements to lesson plans, the internet, social media, and comic books. He even appeared on a commemorative postage stamp (1984) and has his own zip code.

In the early 2000s, the campaign began to more directly target casual campers, hikers, and mountain bikers – the very people who are often responsible for wildfires yet think they are not likely to be. The PSAs featured Smokey Bear less prominently but continued to drive home his message of personal responsibility for wildfire prevention. In 2008, Smokey Bear was reintroduced with a new, modern look aimed at the young adult target audience. This marked the first time Smokey appeared as a computer-generated image. In the years since, the Ad Council and FCB have continued to keep his look fresh with every new PSA that is released.

Current Campaign

PSAs from July 2013 feature a more nostalgic-looking Smokey Bear and take a more educational approach, incorporating proper extinguishing techniques for various fire-start scenarios. To show his appreciation, Smokey gives hugs to reward people who are acting safely with fire.

The 2013 PSAs were launched with a fully integrated public relations effort that yielded over 416 million audience impressions and 80 million earned media impressions. Since the launch, the campaign has been featured in high profile news coverage in The New York Times, NPR, NBC Nightly News, Adweek, The Washington Post, The Washington Times, and The Huffington Post, and in hundreds of environmental, entertainment and consumer blogs. Total reach from press coverage, the multimedia news release, and social media was estimated at 507.6 million people.

Since June 2008, Smokey Bear has accumulated over 180,000 fans on Facebook. In 2010, Smokey's growth in social media expanded to widgets, puzzles and games, an e-card, shareable digital content, and profiles on Twitter, LinkedIn, Flickr, and YouTube. The Ad Council continues to grow and expand the active online communities through partnerships with the social media agency, HelpsGood.

In addition to the launch of new PSAs, a push to introduce Smokey to elementary and middle school students was made with the development and distribution of online and hard copy curriculum materials (available on SmokeyBear.com/Resources.asp). Over 55,200 science teachers in 13,800 schools across the nation received the curricula to teach children the basics of camping safety and wildfire prevention. The teaching materials were also made available for download on SmokeyBear.com.

The 2014 PSAs continue the theme of bar hugs and wildfire prevention education while commemorating Smokey's seventieth birthday. In thanking Smokey for all that he's done for wildfire prevention over the years, forest-loving individuals show Smokey their appreciation in returning his hug, and by continuing to take the proper actions to prevent wildfires. The PSAs remind viewers that although Smokey has been essential to the reduction of wildfires in the last seven decades, he still needs help in reducing accidental wildfires.

Evaluating Impact

Exposure

The Wildfire Prevention campaign consistently receives strong donated support from the media. In 2013, the campaign ranked among the Ad Council's top ten campaigns in donated media value.

Estimated Donated Media 2013	
Medium	Donated Media (\$)
Radio	6,123,001
Television	2,646,430
Outdoor & Transit	16,200,746
Interactive Media	3,425,684
Print	2,097,983
Public Relations (Earned Media)	4,249,998
TOTAL	\$34,743,842

Awareness

Ongoing outreach and support has turned Smokey Bear into one of the most recognized icons in advertising history. According to a 2013 Ad Council tracking survey of U.S. adults¹, approximately 96% have heard of Smokey Bear; 88% correctly identified a picture of Smokey Bear; and 7 out of 10 adults were able to recall Smokey's message of "Only You Can Prevent Wildfires" or a similar reiteration without prompting. In the same survey, slightly under half of adults (45%) recognized the most recent campaign advertising, and the proportion was higher for the core target of 18-34 year olds (56%).

Engagement

Smokey Bear's Facebook page is one of the most active Ad Council communities on Facebook. With more than 180,000 "likes" (and growing), Smokey's community responds enthusiastically to his posts, at times with several hundred comments and "likes." Smokey is continually inspiring a dialogue about the importance of wildfire prevention and the audience responds and shares their personal commitment to Smokey's mission.

The Wildfire Prevention campaign directs people to visit SmokeyBear.com to learn how they can help prevent wildfires. The site includes essential safety information about campfires, debris burning, equipment maintenance, and homes in wildfire prone areas. Additional content includes historical campaign information, educational resources, and a section for kids to learn about the issue and engage with Smokey Bear. In 2013, the site hosted over 4.3M visits, averaging 360,000 visits per month.

Impact

While not necessarily wholly attributable to the PSA campaign efforts, since the Wildfire Prevention campaign began in 1944, the total number of acres burned annually by wildfires has dropped significantly, from 22 million acres to an average of 6.7 million annually today. Further progress has occurred during the most recent campaign time period.

¹ Who live near or recreate in wooded areas/the great outdoors

Conclusion

Smokey Bear is an American icon whose message has stood the test of time as the longest running public service advertising campaign in the United States. With over \$1.4 billion in donated media since its inception, the Wildfire Prevention campaign continues to garner an impressive amount of media support. Smokey's message remains as relevant as it was in 1944. As long as human carelessness threatens our nation's forests and wildlands, Smokey Bear will continue to remind us that "Only you can prevent wildfires."