

The Human Billboards 1972

As the state campaign director for “No on Proposition 22” I developed a public advertising campaign, which we called “human billboards.”

Hundreds of farmworker union campaign volunteers were organized into squads of 50 or so, each person carrying a placard approximately 2 ft. x 3 ft. in dimension, each one identical, white block lettering on black, except for the message. These stark-looking “billboards” carried such messages as “L.A. Times Says No on 22,” “AFL-CIO Says No on 22,” “Council of Churches Says No on 22,” and so on.

We launched the human billboards in the last two weeks of the campaign. The squads were deployed in the early morning - 6:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. - at the major freeway-feeder-streets in the San Fernando Valley, Santa Monica, San Gabriel Valley, etc. By placing each human billboard ten yards apart, we were able to create a line of billboards on both sides of the street four city blocks long leading up to the major freeway entrances.

In the afternoon, at the end of the work day - 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. - we reversed the process by deploying our volunteer squads at major freeway entrances from Central Los Angeles to billboard the commuters leaving work on their drive back to the suburbs. The goal of each human billboard was to make friendly eye and hand contact with the driver of the car and point to his/her billboard.

The effect was sensational! Commuters honked their horns and waved their approval. The radio and TV traffic helicopters and planes picked up the demonstration and rolled it out on the local news during the morning and evening drive times by updating commuters where the farmworker human billboards were located and why they were out there on the streets waving and talking to the commuters. Those of you not familiar with California campaigns have to understand that the L.A. media market reaches 56% of the state vote. This meant that the farmworker human billboards were reaching an audience from Santa Barbara on the north to San Bernardino and Riverside on the south – many thousands of dollars worth of free and sympathetic advertising.

One Sunday, right before the Tuesday election, we brought all the billboard squads together and completely surrounded - 10 yards apart - the Memorial Coliseum three hours before the L.A. Rams football game, which drew more than 80,000 spectators. By this time the No on 22 campaign was much in the news and sports fans had heard about the human billboards.

This time, however, we added a new twist - our human billboards stood in complete silence like stone statues. This silence, several hundred people holding billboards and the stadium surrounded, generated a powerful and sobering effect on the thousands of people who passed through these billboard lines to enter the coliseum. Once again, the media picked it up and rolled it out on the airwaves.

Thirty years later, when I come across a modern-day version of human billboards, I can be quite critical of their performance. Billboarders all bunched up on a street corner looking like a mob of out-of control demonstrators. What a waste of human energy!

Chalk it up to the insufferable purist in me: if it can't be done the way I organized it, then it won't work!