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Smart Ways to Inform

Introduction

Only seldom you would find a public service announcement campaign that is interesting enough to be watched, and rewatched over and over again. Such a rarity is the rail safety campaign put out by Metro Trains in Melbourne, Australia. The campaign, an animated music video titled *Dumb Ways to Die*, was released in November 2012, and soon became an internet sensation for its sheer brilliance. With its morbidly cute characters and catchy music, it makes for one of the best safety campaigns, and more so a very complex narrative.

In this paper, after establishing the relevant context and rhetorical situation, I will analyze the rhetorical effectiveness of the campaign, identifying the various rhetoric devices which are used by the authors to convey their intended message to their audience - the reasons *Dumb Ways to Die* works as a marvelous campaign. I will then discuss the progression of the text and how it uses the audience's attention to its advantage towards the end. Further, I will look at the effectiveness of the campaign, based both on the facts and statistics released by Metro Trains and the content of the music video. Let's start by examining the rhetorical situation.

Rhetorical Situation

The campaign was created by Metro Trains with the help of the advertising agency McCann Melbourne. Originally, it appeared in November of 2012 in newspaper clippings, local radio channels, and outdoor advertising throughout the Melbourne metro network. While the

music is attributed to the artist ‘Tangerine Kitty’, the author here is clearly the Melbourne Metro Trains. Despite the fact that there were a lot of significant contributors attached to the music video, it can be argued that since it was created for safety-related issues centered around the Australian train network, its principal author in concern would be Metro Trains. As such, we also have a certain knowledge of the purpose of the video - to promote safety around trains in Melbourne.

Clearly, we can argue that the intended audience of the text will be the people of Melbourne who use the train network. However, looking specifically at the video, with its cute rounded characters and high-pitched voices, it seems like it was directed toward kids. After all, it is only in kids movies that we see this type of animation. Moreover, as the video was uploaded to internet media websites such as YouTube and Tumblr, it might also have been directed towards a broader audience than just kids or people of Melbourne. If the target audience was just the people of Melbourne, why broadcast the campaign to everyone who has access to the internet?

While these look like tempting alternatives, I would argue otherwise. One could reason that the animation style and music are merely devices used to attract the attention of the people who view it. Although it involves cute animation and catchy lyrics, it does have some absurdly funny deaths, which give the viewers a warning about increasingly silly ways to lose one’s life, with the last three deaths being about possible hazards at train stations. Thus, it can be argued that these devices which have been used by the creators to gain the attention of the viewers are also at play so as to convey a very serious message about rail safety to a greater variety of people (than just children) by attracting them towards the message itself.

Furthermore, the usage of internet media to promote the campaign is a powerful move - people pay more attention to the videos they watch on YouTube than they do to ones being broadcast on TV sets on train stations. Unlike TV or Outdoor Media, on platforms such as YouTube, people have the ability to choose what they want to watch. As such, this ability implies that people will often pay more attention to a safety campaign on YouTube they choose to watch than to a different campaign that was broadcast in between episodes of someone's favorite TV show. Promoting on social media also improves the outreach several-fold. In conclusion, we can definitely say that the primary audience of the safety campaign is the population of Melbourne using the Metro Trains rail. However, it does have a bigger secondary audience, as it promotes safety in general, and also intends to make money with the song that drives the campaign via YouTube revenue and usage royalties.

Rhetorical Appeals

Dumb Ways to Die, in all its beauty, employs more than just cute characters, memorable music, and cheeky humor to communicate its message to the audience. While these certainly are dominant, the use of logical progression to gain the attention of viewers is clearly visible. The content of the video and the lyrics are used in a way such that it keeps the viewers interested until the very end. What would otherwise have been a boring safety message is then delivered with great appeal. In addition, the refined quality of the campaign, among some other things, also displays the credibility of the authority behind it. We shall now examine all of these rhetorical appeals in detail, starting with the one which appears to preside over the other two.

Pathos

Written with great attention to detail, *Dumb Ways to Die* employs catchy music as well as a light color palette with bright blues and vibrant pink. Both the music and the video use techniques similar to those you would see in kids animated movies, such as cute dances, animation synchronized with the music, almost absurd seeming anatomy. These tropes gain your attention and immerse you in the details of the music video. Once there, you are instantly filled with joy due to the humorous nature of the lyrics. You almost feel like singing along.

The song opens with the line “*Set fire to your hair*” with a round glob-like character running towards the camera with his hair set on fire. Further, we hear “*poke a stick at a grizzly bear, take your helmet off in outer space, use your private parts as piranha bait*”; it presents many more such ‘Dumb Ways to Die’, with a comedic edge and a seemingly light-hearted touch to it before moving on to the chorus. In the chorus, all the characters which have just met their hilariously gruesome deaths dance together. Clearly, the utilization of light colors, circular blobs as characters, a catchy hook, the music video appeals to the emotions of the viewers. It tries to trigger emotional responses based not only on previously held expectations from a similar style of animation and music but also by breaking those sets of expectations for humor. It uses hyperbole in its very content to induce a comedic sense. Only rarely an animation with such techniques would talk about one of the deepest subjects that concern human beings - death, and one of the most boring ones - warnings. However, by employing these very methods, *Dumb Ways to Die* can communicate its very message without seeming like a boring public service announcement. As stated by the creative director of McCann, the agency which created the campaign in collaboration with Metro Trains, “The aim of this campaign is to engage an

audience that really doesn't want to hear any kind of safety message, and we think *Dumb Ways To Die* will.”

Logos

The logical flow of the campaign is one thing which really pleases me. On looking closely, we see a seemingly funny music video with melodious tunes and bubbly characters transition into a well thought out narrative for a safety campaign. While the music video employs a lot of techniques attract the attention of the people who might potentially be a part of the target audience and to make it relatable to them, it also uses a very effective method of organizing its content - the dumb ways to die - to keep that attention for long enough before it delivers its actual message.

For the first few minutes, it shows the silliest things you could do that would take your life, in an increasing order of such stupidity. This makes it seem like just a random music video, one which can be enjoyed by both adults and children alike. However, soon as we start to get closer to the end, the stupid things that the characters do become more and more closely associated with trains and safety around trains. Specifically, these are the last three deaths before the final chorus of the song. This chorus, however, is a little different from the rest. While previously, the words “*dumb ways to die*” are repeated, this time, the chorus starts with “[addressing the descriptions of the last three deaths] *they might not rhyme, but they’re quite possibly the dumbest ways to die,*” and goes on to repeat the phrase “*dumbest ways to die.*” It naturally seems absurd for anything you could do around trains to be stupider than “*using private parts as piranha bait,*” but that merely helps the creators reinforce the idea that the accidents around trains are quite possibly the dumbest ways to die. Right after the last chorus, at

the end of the video, we see a title card from Metro Trains with the spoken message “Be Safe Around Trains”. With this, not only do they retain the attention of the people who are watching the video right until the end, but manage to communicate effectively the message about safety around trains without sounding like just another mundane public service announcement.

Ethos

The quality of the animation style, the rigor with which the entire thing is edited, the amount of effort that is seen put into the creation of this all echo professionalism. Further, knowing in the end that it is a safety message about railways that comes from one of the biggest inner city train operators in the world, we have a sense that the content comes from a very credible source. Unlike most animations, it is not a work intended for entertainment, which also carries an important takeaway message with it. It is rather an important message about personal safety that is important for the society which is delivered in an entertaining fashion - making it one of the most credible and effective campaigns of the era of the Internet.

Effectiveness

We have already talked about how *Dumb Ways to Die* is effective in conveying the message that it stands for. It utilizes a great logical flow and appropriate emotional connections to keep the audience's attention before they move on to communicating their message with suitable literary devices (such as hyperboles). It was also a good financial investment by the Melbourne Metro Trains, as it generated over an estimated \$50 million worth of global media value in only two weeks. However, the only way to truly judge the effectiveness of a safety campaign as a whole is to look at the facts which deal with the awareness of the safety it seeks to enhance.

While it was a huge monetary success for the creative agency McCann which originally developed this for Metro Trains through YouTube revenue, the campaign was even more so successful on the train stations of Melbourne. In an article published only a few months after the videos initial broadcast in Melbourne and appearance on YouTube, Metro Trains stated that there was a 30% reduction in the number of “near-miss” accidents around trains. It was also awarded several awards for advertisement campaigns, most notably the Webby Award in 2013 for Best Public Services & Activism by an Internet Phenomenon.

Conclusion

After having looked at the various rhetorical devices that *Dumb Ways to Die* employs to communicate its message, we can say for sure that it has a brilliant balance of different rhetorical appeals, which make it very effective in communicating its message. The facts are with us on this one too - with the campaign fulfilling both its monetary and public service purposes. In a very beautiful way, McCann and Metro Trains have collaborated to create one of the most entertaining and investing safety campaigns of our generation, almost the holy grail of the genre. It completely lives up to the expectations of its own creative director, transforming what would just have been a boring safety message into a lovable and memorable audio-visual performance.