

Creating counter-ads

You can “talk back” to deceptive or harmful media messages by creating *counter-ads*. These are parodies of advertisements, delivering more truthful or constructive messages using the same persuasion techniques as real ads. By creating counter-ads, you can apply media literacy skills to communicate positive messages, in a fun and engaging exercise.

The simplest way to create a counter-ad is to alter a real ad (magazine or newspaper ads work best) by changing the text or adding graphic elements; just write or draw over the original ad, or paste new materials onto it. (An example: change “Come to Marlboro Country” to “Come to Marlboro’s Graveyard” and add a few tombstones to the landscape.) A counter-ad can also be created by drawing a new image, copying the design and layout of a real ad. Collage techniques work well, too. You can also write scripts for radio or TV counter-ads, and read them to a class or group. Or take it a step further and record or videotape your counter-ad.

Here are a few tips to help you make effective counter-ads:

- **Analyze.** Look at several real ads and try to figure out why they’re effective. The best counter-ads use the same techniques to deliver a different message.
- **Power.** Your message has to break through the clutter of all the real ads that people see or hear. Think about what makes an ad memorable to you. What techniques does it use to grab your attention? Use them.
- **Persuade.** Use the same persuasion techniques found in real ads – like humor, repetition, or flattery -- to deliver your alternative message.
- **Pictures.** Visual images are incredibly powerful. People often forget what they read or hear, but remember what they see. The best counter-ads, like the best ads, tell their stories through pictures.
- **Rebellion.** Advertising targeted at young people often appeals to a sense of youthful rebellion. Effective counter-ads expose misleading and manipulative advertising methods and turn their rebellious spirit toward the corporate sponsors who use them.
- **“KISS” – Keep It Short & Simple.** Use only one idea for your main message. Focus everything on getting this message across.
- **Plan.** Try to think of everything – words, images, design -- before you begin production. Make a few sketches or rough drafts before you start crafting the final product.

- **Practice.** If you're going to perform a radio or TV script (and especially if you're making an audio recording or video) your cast and crew will need to rehearse. Then, rehearse it again.
- **Teamwork.** Working in a team can lighten your workload and spark creativity. Brainstorm ideas as a group. Make sure all members share responsibility for the work.
- **Revise.** When you think you're finished, show your counter-ad to uninvolved people for feedback. Do they understand it? Do they think it's funny? Use their responses to revise your work for maximum impact.
- **Distribute.** Your ideas were meant to be seen! Make copies of your counter-ads and post them around your school, workplace, community center, etc. Get them published in your organizational or school newspaper. Show your videotape to other kids and adults. Your counter-ad can stimulate needed discussion and debate around media issues.
- **Have fun!** Making a counter-ad is a fun way to learn about media, to be creative, and to express your views. Enjoy it!