

## The American Plastics Council Campaign

*A Case Study of Award Winning Brand Positioning and Advertising Research*



In the early 1990s, the U.S. plastics industry faced a gloomy future. The rise in environmental activism had generated considerable concern about plastics, causing the industry to be singled out by many as a callous “villain.” Plastics were being unfairly blamed for most of the world’s solid waste problems.



*“78% of U.S. public felt that “plastic harms the environment” and 37% “avoid buying products packaged in plastic.”*

*– Harris Interactive, 1992*

Negative perceptions and guilt drove some consumers to boycott plastics, and major corporate customers were beginning to deselect plastics in deference to public sentiment against non-biodegradable materials. Market share was falling. Legislation to ban plastics was being proposed across the country.

In the spring of 1992, the American Plastics Council, a national association of plastics manufacturers, commissioned Harris Interactive and DMB&B advertising to help refine and implement a coordinated communications strategy targeting U.S. consumers. The objectives of the campaign were to stop the decline in consumer attitudes toward plastics and turn it around and create a positive image for the industry.

### Gaining Insights

Traditional forms of research had already been tried, but the resulting advertisements—which responded directly to environmental attacks—did little to bolster plastics’ flagging image. Success would require an innovative approach to understanding how Americans think and feel about plastics.

Harris Interactive’s VISTA technique was the key that unlocked that understanding. VISTA is a proprietary research methodology, built on in-depth personal interviews, that reveals a person’s underlying emotions and values.

We have learned through experience that the most powerful and motivating communications are those which create a positive and personally relevant connection between the product and the consumer, tapping into the values which are most important in their lives.

VISTA interviews uncover the pathway on which that connection can be formed—the perceptual linkages between a product’s attributes, its practical and emotional benefits for the consumer, and the personal values a consumer may associate with it. The result is a map of the consumer’s decision-making process for a particular product, which serves as a blueprint for a successful communications strategy.

Our analysis revealed that people's negative perceptions about plastics relating to environmental concerns were only part of the story. We discovered that people have many positive associations with plastics because they keep food fresh, keep people safe and healthy, and make possible many of today's lifesaving medical technologies.

A large survey of adult Americans confirmed and expanded on the findings of the VISTA research, and provided a quantitative benchmark of public attitudes about plastics.

### Developing the Strategy

Instead of trying to answer environmental concerns head-on with advertising, we concluded that the new strategy should focus on the positive benefits that plastics bring to our lives, in particular the health, safety, and medical applications of plastics. This new strategy would provide positive emotional reasons for supporting plastics, by building on the favorable associations people already held. The tagline, "Plastics Make It Possible," was born.



To develop concepts for television, radio, and print ads, the creative team drew on important findings from the VISTA and benchmark studies. The campaign featured examples of how plastics benefit our everyday lives. Images like a premature infant cradled within the protective walls of a plastic incubator, a boy being protected by a football helmet and pads, and a man able to walk again through the use of a prosthetic joint, brought home the emotional message of how plastics help protect and heal.

Harris Interactive also worked with the American Plastics Council to evaluate the effectiveness of rough animatic executions. Executional elements which could be changed or improved to make the ads more persuasive were pinpointed. As a result, the client was confident, before any money was spent on final production and media, that the ads would accomplish what they were designed to do.

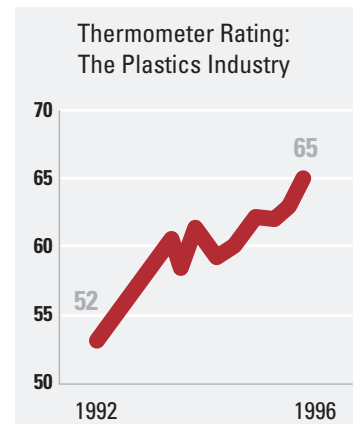
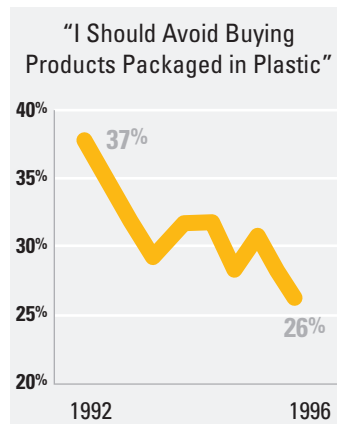
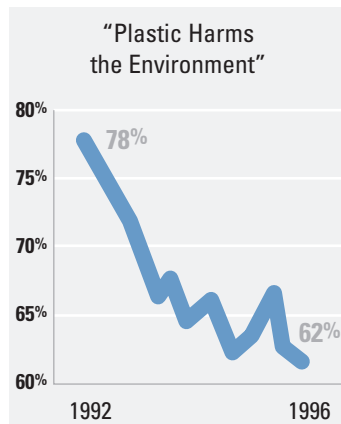
### Measuring the Results

The ads first aired in 1993. The first year of the campaign brought remarkable impacts on public opinion, as measured by ongoing tracking research. On a thermometer scale, the overall rating of the plastics industry increased from 52 to 60 over the course of just one year.

Over the next few years, the campaign continued to have a measurable effect on people's attitudes:

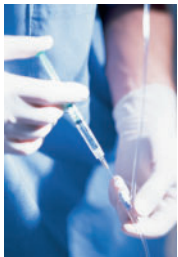
- Between 1992 and 1996, the percentage of Americans who believed that "the benefits of using plastic outweigh the negatives" increased 14 percentage points.
- Over the same period, the percentage who felt they "should avoid buying products packaged in plastic" decreased 11 points.
- Early on, Harris Interactive had segmented the U.S. public into "pro-plastics industry" and "anti-plastics industry" segments, based on whether they thought plastics *cause* environmental problems or *solve* environmental problems. Over the first five years of the campaign, as measured by tracking studies, 10 million households moved away from an "anti-plastics" orientation, while 12.5 million moved into the "pro-plastics" group.
- The number of bills proposed in state legislatures which would adversely affect the plastics industry declined by half between 1991 and 1996. There was a corresponding increase in bills to delay or repeal adverse laws.

Plastics: Results



- Within 3 years, punitive legislation nearly gone.
- Plastic bags top choice in grocery stores.

The “Plastics Make it Possible” campaign has allowed the industry to redefine the debate about plastics. As a result, it has enabled this material to be appreciated for its unique properties rather than overshadowed by environmental concerns. The campaign was deemed an overwhelming success.



On April 8, 1997, the Advertising Research Foundation presented its David Ogilvy Gold Medallion award to a winning team including Harris Interactive, D’Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles, of Detroit, Michigan, and the American Plastics Council of Washington, DC. Created in 1994, the prestigious David Ogilvy Research Awards are given “for outstanding research contributions to the development of creative and successful advertising campaigns.”

The campaign continued for nearly another decade until 2005. During that period, the strategic positioning of the *plastics* brand as essential to our health and safety proved to be robust and long lasting:

- Proved to be an effective positioning against unexpected claims related to health.
- Worked across multiple agency and account team executions.
- Provided a framework to handle new issues.

Although unsubstantiated, activist challenges to the industry moved from solid waste concerns to health concerns. With children’s health as a focal point, plastics toys, microwave containers, wraps, and baby bottles came under attack. By continuing the strategic message of the health and safety benefits of plastics in our lives, most consumers were persuaded that the health and safety benefits of plastics far outweigh the risks.

Moreover, as plastics’ equity continued to build, the industry was able to effectively communicate about new product areas, such as use of plastics in automobiles. Now rather than rejecting plastics as a fragile and unsafe material, consumers were now willing to listen to how the collision absorption potential of plastics could save lives.

By 2005, the equity of plastics could be effectively leveraged as one of the strongest proof points in the American Chemistry Council *essential*<sub>2</sub> campaign.

