

TheSteelAlliance Campaign

A Case Study of Award Winning Advertising Research and Strategy



A menacing shark swims through the clear blue water. We see the face of a terrified scuba diver, separated from the shark by only a metal cage. The words flash on screen,

"Right now this guy is thinking: a. Steel is the most recycled material on Earth."

Cut back to the shark, eyes glaring and teeth bared. Again to the words,

"b. PLEASE, PLEASE let this thing be made of steel!"

In March 1999 the Harris Interactive Brand and Strategy Consulting team was recognized with a national award for "research excellence in support of creative and successful advertising campaigns." The Advertising Research Foundation presented its annual David Ogilvy Research Award first place trophy to the firm in recognition of our research and strategic consulting work on behalf of TheSteelAlliance, a consortium of the major U.S. steel manufacturers.

Harris Interactive, in partnership with GSD&M advertising and Porter-Novelli public relations, helped TheSteelAlliance develop its current industry advertising campaign, "The New Steel. Feel The Strength."

The campaign, composed entirely of 15-second television spots and accompanying print ads, began running in 1997. The ads feature dramatic, memorable, and sometimes humorous vignettes, which blended two simple messages: Steel is the most recycled material on earth, and steel, like no other material, provides strength that helps protect you and your family.

This is the story behind the successful campaign to reposition one of the oldest and most common materials in the world.

In 1996, the American Iron and Steel Institute commissioned Harris Interactive to conduct a comprehensive study of Americans' attitudes toward steel. That study, and others that followed, showed that people had outdated perceptions of steel.

Gaining Insights

It became clear that the industry needed to take action. The research helped unite the industry behind a common cause. TheSteelAlliance was formed, with one of its first objectives to sponsor an image-building communications campaign. The goals of that campaign were to make consumers more aware of the benefits of steel in their lives, to make them feel more positively toward the material, and to motivate them to ask for steel in the products they buy.

In developing the steel industry's strategy, Harris Interactive examined the positive associations (equities) and negative associations (disequities) in the minds of potential consumers. The net result of those positives minus negatives is called perceptual equity. A strong perceptual equity is essential to attract and retain customers. The goal is to identify, measure, and manage those equities and disequities in a way that will build value for the client.

At the time of our early research, steel did not have a very strong perceptual equity in the minds of American consumers. If anything, perceptions of steel tilted toward the minus. The goal of the campaign was to create a positive new image for the material.

From our VISTA study, we learned that people had a number of negative associations with steel, most of these related to the environment. For the average American, the mention of steel conjured up images of open-hearth furnaces, smokestacks, and mountains of rusting old cars. Steel was viewed as an "old" material, far from the image the industry wanted, to be seen as "the material of the 21st Century." We discovered that most people were ignorant of the strides the industry had made in reducing pollution by modernizing plants and cleaning up production methods. They were unfamiliar with the new varieties of lighter weight, stronger steel. Most importantly, they were not aware of the fact that steel is the most recycled material in the world.

On the other side of the equation, people did have positive perceptions of steel. The most powerful of these had to do with steel's strength, and the safety and security benefits that steel products can provide. But for most people, these positive benefits were only unearthed by the in-depth VISTA interviewing technique. They simply did not think about these benefits on a conscious level. As one steelmaker put it, "consumers were out of touch with the marvelous properties of the material."

So the advertising took on the feeling of an educational campaign, to "enlighten" consumers by reminding them of the positive benefits of steel in their lives.



Building Strategy

Based on the research, we knew the campaign had to accomplish two things: First, we knew that we had to tap into the personal value of security by emphasizing the material's strength. And second, we needed to confront the negative environmental perceptions by emphasizing steel's recyclability. Some ads focused on one message, some on the other, while some combined both messages, as in the "Shark" spot.

In conducting our surveys, we found that people were surprised to learn that steel is the most recycled material in the world. The creative team played on that element of surprise in crafting the ads.

In one execution, an elderly woman makes her way slowly from her front door to the curbside, carrying a recycling bin filled with cans and bottles. As she sets down the bin, a voice-over poses this riddle: "What's the one material that helps preserve the earth by being recycled more than anything else in the world?" As the lady turns to walk back, a large junk car falls from the sky, crushing the tiny blue bin. Unfazed, the woman toddles on. "It just doesn't always fit in those little bins," quips the announcer.

One of Harris Interactive's message testing techniques, known as PulseLineSM, was used to assess concepts for TV spots before they were produced. Audience response scores and the discussions that followed helped the creative team fine-tune specific parts of the ads to make them more effective.

Once the campaign was launched, research continued to play a role. One way was by guiding the media buy. Tracking showed that women responded to the ads with more dramatic shifts in opinion than men who were exposed to the same ads. That helped the client get the most bang for their buck by concentrating on programs with predominantly female audiences.

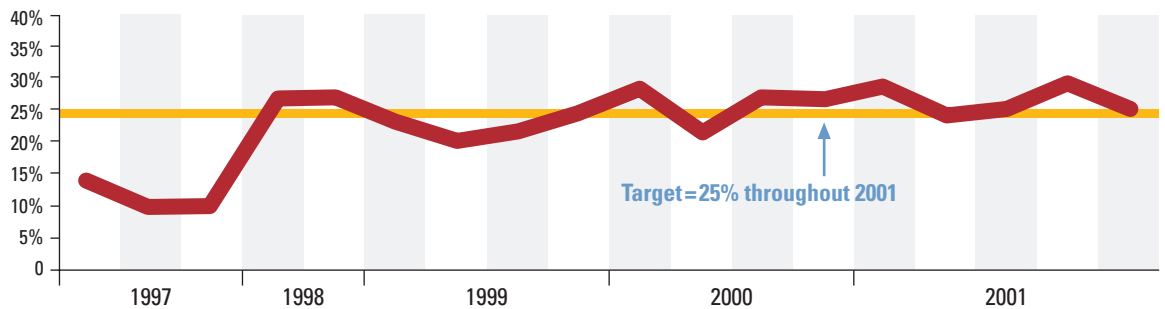
The initial media buy was based on “flighting,” alternating periods of heavy advertising exposure with periods of no advertising. But the tracking studies suggested that the gains in awareness and attitudes that were measured during the heavy exposure periods were dropping off when the ads stopped. So the decision was made to go with a continuous media buy, keeping the ads on the air all the time.

Measuring Results

Tracking studies showed that over the first 18 months of the campaign, Americans’ average favorability toward steel as a material improved measurably. Among those who had heard or read recently about steel, positive mentions soared from 24% to 70%, while negative mentions fell from 37% to just 5% over the same period. More Americans now view steel as part of the environmental solution rather than the problem, and steel is named most often as “the material of the future.”

Top of Mind Awareness of Steel – USA 2001

“Have you seen, heard or read anything recently in the news, in advertisements, or from people you know that focuses on steel, steel products, or the ways that steel is now being used?”



US: Sept. 2001; N=1,003/Margin of error=+/-3.1

Another strong indicator of a successful campaign is the results of the “pull campaign” appealing directly to consumers. As consumer impressions of Steel improved, they began to demand steel in the products they bought, and manufacturers acquiesced to that demand. In 1997, at the start of the campaign, manufacturer advertising citing the benefits of steel in their products accounted for only \$1 million annually. By 2000, that figure reached \$128 million. This “ad equivalency” greatly leveraged TheSteelAlliance’s own ad spending.

