

Thousands Alive Thanks to Ads

VirtueMedia Makes Claim for MTV and BET Commercials

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Roswell, Ga. — For 10 years, the Roswell, Ga.-based nonprofit VirtueMedia has been creating and airing educational pro-life commercials on local radio and television stations nationwide. For the first time, earlier this year, the nonprofit aired crisis-pregnancy commercials on national television — MTV and BET (Black Entertainment Television). The results amazed even the organizers.

During a five-week campaign between late September and early November, the commercials generated nearly 22,000 requests for help from abortion-vulnerable women. Organizers estimate that during that time as many as 11,000 babies may have been saved from abortion.

“It’s clear that if we want to communicate with abortion-vulnerable women, we need to reach them through these avenues,” said Tom Peterson, founder and president of VirtueMedia. “When we do, the results are miraculous.”

VirtueMedia aired separate crisis-pregnancy center commercials — one multicultural and the other African-American — with separate referral telephone numbers and separate websites to better track the direct responses to the ads. With the help of Option Line — a resource that connects individuals with abortion alternatives — the telephone inquiries and web zip-code searches were able to route those in crisis pregnancies to pro-life pregnancy-resource centers in their area.

According to Peterson’s data, on one day alone, Oct. 20, 2008, exactly 1,044 abortion-vulnerable women responded to the national ads — 452 via the web and 592 by telephone. Of the total number of inquiries, 623 came from MTV and 421 from BET.

“Nothing like this has ever been done in the 35-year battle to promote the sanctity of life,” said Peterson.

Peterson is no stranger to media campaigns. Prior to founding VirtueMedia, he spent 25 years in advertising and marketing.

That campaign is scheduled to air in a dozen dioceses in 2009, and Peterson hopes to air ads nationally on a regular basis, with one appearing during the Super Bowl.

In the 30-second crisis-pregnancy ads, multiple women voice their concerns and fears about their pregnancies, saying things like, “I was pregnant, and I wasn’t sure what to do.” The ad lists a toll-free telephone number and the website PregnancyLine.com.

The ads aired around-the-clock, but most aired at night when women ages 18-24

watch TV the most.

“Those who are in crisis pregnancies are often up late at night with worry and concern,” said Peterson. “It’s the best time to reach them at the lowest cost.”

Having done similar ads for local television markets for many years, Peterson has statistics to back up his claim that they make a difference.

“There seems to be clear proof that airing VirtueMedia pro-life ads consistently does make a difference,” said Peterson.

According to Peterson, data in the markets where the ads have shown for a longer period of time, such as Dayton, Ohio, where VirtueMedia has partnered with Dayton Right to Life, and Charlotte, N.C., where they’ve partnered with North Carolina Right to Life, has shown a decrease in the abortion rate by as much as 15%. Similar results exist in other areas where the ads have run, including Atlanta and Phoenix.

“The abortion rates in those specific counties where the ads have run have dropped,” added Peterson. “Amazingly, in the other counties where the ads have not aired, the abortion rates have increased over the same time period. Where we’ve advertised heavily, it’s had an impact.”

Barbara Holt, president of North Carolina Right to Life, has seen the impact of the ads firsthand. North Carolina Right to Life partnered with VirtueMedia beginning in 2006, then again in 2007 and 2008. They aired three types of ads — one focused on unplanned pregnancy, another on post-abortion syndrome, and a third general ad on changing minds and hearts to respect life.

“One-third of the abortions in the state are done in the Charlotte area,” said Holt. “According to the overall 2007 North Carolina abortion statistics, there was a decline of less than 1,900 abortions each year, but Charlotte had three times fewer abortions than the other area that experienced a decline.”

The ads began airing in Phoenix in January 2006 and have continued somewhat consistently ever since. The Diocese of Phoenix’s Office of Marriage and Respect Life utilizes moneys collected during the Respect Life Sunday appeal to finance the VirtueMedia advertising locally. The ads run on programs targeting women ages 18 to 49.

“They air on five or six stations. Since they’ve begun airing on MTV, we’ve had a spike in the number of calls from younger girls,” noted Mike Phelan, director of the Office of Marriage and Respect Life. “It’s not a preaching to the choir thing. The ads are on some pretty not-for-Catholics programming as well as programs older women might watch, since they are the main encouragers of abortion. We’re trying to impact the general culture.”

Phelan said that the ads have been both helpful and effective, resulting in a 20% decrease in abortion in the Phoenix area since the ads first aired.

Why TV?

Television advertising, said Peterson, makes great sense, considering the amount of time viewers spend watching.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, the average American consumes about 38 hours of media per week, with television being the No. 1 choice. A recent National Institutes of Health study sponsored by Yale University showed that youth consume 45 hours of entertainment media each week.

While Peterson said that print and radio advertising is also effective, television advertising works best because it's multidimensional. He compared it with the effect of entering a church.

"When you enter a church, you see the stained-glass windows and the artwork and the statues, and you hear the Gregorian chant or organ music playing," he said. "It helps bring you into the sacred. With this kind of advertising, the pictures, the words and the music all play a part. It helps to bring you to a change of heart and mind."

With additional fundraising support, Peterson wants to expand the MTV and BET campaign. He plans to air several hundred ads beginning after Christmas and continuing through March.

"It's a time of year when viewership is high and ad rates are low," said Peterson.

"Airing a national campaign is extremely efficient and effective since we're able to reach millions of women at the fraction of airing in local markets," said Peterson. "The fruit of the campaign is obvious, and we pray that God's grace and kind donors will help us to continue these ads year-round."

Still, amid the success, Peterson isn't naive enough to believe that the ads are a sudden cure-all.

"Where abortion rates are dropping, there's also been an increase in RU-486 abortion pill usage and other threats to life, so we can't be euphoric just about abortion numbers declining," said Peterson. "We can only be good stewards by using tools like these commercials to reduce the numbers."

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