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“Dumb Ways to Die”: Advertising Train Safety (C)

The “Dumb Ways to Die” (DWTD) campaign stole the show at the June 2013 Cannes Lions festival, international advertising’s annual awards event. DWTD captured a record five Cannes Grand Prix.¹

David Gallagher, chair of the Cannes Public Relations Lions awards jury, stated: “The content was based on real human insight—it was fun, engaging and immensely shareable. And it led to a 21 percent reduction in serious train accidents, so it was very effective.”²

John Mescall, executive creative director at McCann and the copywriter on DWTD, commented: “We could have shown documentary film in which people get hit by trains, but we were going for entertainment rather than shock value. . . . We didn’t preach, we didn’t threaten, we didn’t lecture. . . . We wanted to engage a young audience who are wired to resist lectures and warnings from authorities, but would share recommendations peer-to-peer. It allows you to call out your friends without losing your cred.”³

Speaking at Cannes, Mescall said: “When you’re trying to achieve behavioral change in a world of blunt instruments, it’s far more effective to bring people along than hit them with your message. . . . Rather than repel young people who didn’t want to hear a message about train safety, DWTD made it socially acceptable to discuss something as boring as being safe around trains.”⁴

DWTD was extended across the full range of media. There was even a DWTD mobile phone app in which players had to prevent characters from dying a gruesome death. Supermodel Kate Moss revealed in an interview that this was her favorite phone app. “It is totally addictive,” she said.⁵ The game climbed to number one in 17 countries. The app also invited players to pledge “not to do dumb stuff around trains.”⁶

Between November 2012 and July 2013, the DWTD public service announcement was viewed 57 million times and garnered 3.8 Facebook shares, making it the most-shared PSA in history.⁷ Eight months after launch, DWTD was still the fourth most-shared ad of the month. One million online pledges were received.⁸ Commentators estimated the value of free media coverage—including stories about the ad—at \$60 million.⁹ The song charted in 28 countries.¹⁰

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Commenting on the low budget campaign's effectiveness, Mescall stated: "You don't need a lot of money to do something outstanding. . . . It gives heart to marketers everywhere."¹¹

Metro Trains reported a 30% reduction in near-miss accidents, from 13.29 near-misses per million kilometers traveled from November 2011 to January 2012, to 9.17 near-misses per million kilometers traveled from November 2012 to January 2013.¹²

Endnotes

¹ Official campaign site, <http://dumbwaystodie.com/>, accessed August 2013.

² Bruce Kennedy, "Why 'Dumb Ways to Die' Became A Viral Hit," What's Trending on Money (blog), MSN.com, June 18, 2013, <http://money.msn.com/now/blog--why-dumb-ways-to-die-became-a-viral-hit>, accessed August 2013.

³ Barbara Lippert, "'Dumb Ways To Die' Is Charmingly Gruesome," MediaPost.com, June 2013, <http://www.mediapost.com>, accessed September 2013.

⁴ Darren Davidson, "A Not So Dumb Way to Sell Rail Safety Acclaimed," *The Australian*, June 20, 2013, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/media/a-not-so-dumb-way-to-sell-rail-safety-acclaimed/story-e6frg996-1226666544520#>, accessed August 2013.

⁵ Annette Sharp et al., "Sydney Confidential," *Daily Telegraph* (Australia), July 22, 2013, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/entertainment/sydney-confidential/kate-moss-reveals-favourite-phone-app-is-aussie-train-safety-campaign-dumb-ways-to-die/story-fni0cvc9-1226682740289>, accessed August 2013.

⁶ McCann Australia, "Transformation," <http://www.mccann.com.au/project/dumb-ways-to-die>, accessed August 2013.

⁷ Lippert, "'Dumb Ways To Die' Is Charmingly Gruesome."

⁸ Shawn Amos, "WATCH: Content Shines at Cannes," *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shawn-amos/watch-content-shines-at_c_b_3484442, accessed August 2013.

⁹ Darren Davidson, "Safety Ad Puts McCann on Track," *The Australian*, June 24, 2013, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/media/train-ad-puts-mccann-on-track/story-e6frg996-1226668433366#>, accessed August 2013.

¹⁰ Asher Moses, "Safety Video Goes Viral, Not Bad for a Dumb Idea," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 30, 2012.

¹¹ Davidson, "A Not So Dumb Way to Sell Rail Safety Acclaimed."

¹² Stephen Cauchi, "No dumb luck: Metro claims safety success," *The Age*, February 14, 2013, <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/no-dumb-luck-metro-claims-safety-success-20130214-2eelt.html>