

The information campaign during the 1994 Austrian EU accession referendum.

An extract of the main findings of The 1996 Grey Report on EU referendums "Influencing Public Opinion in a Divided Europe"

[The EU Accession] referendums held so far have been concerned with the issue of membership and the future direction of the Union. They show that in most countries Europeans are split in roughly equal measure. Sweden and Finland both voted in favour of membership, but the vote was extremely close. Norway too was split, with the anti-Unionists winning the day by the narrowest of margins. In Denmark two polls were conducted on the question of whether or not to accept the Maastricht treaty. The first resulted in a "No" vote, the second in a "Yes", *but each could have gone either way.*

The only exception was Austria which held its referendum on European membership in June 1994. The result showed overwhelming public support for joining the Union.

All these referendums saw heavy advertising/communications programmes designed to influence the vote. These were generally fragmented, short-term and lacking in professionalism; there is little evidence to suggest that they played an important part in final voting decisions.

But the experience of Austria was quite different. The pro-Europe communications strategy funded by the Government was meticulously planned and executed. In addition to mainstream advertising in the run-up to the referendum, a PR operation that ran over years rather than months, the campaign adopted a personal approach to voters via well designed direct mail information packs including a telephone hotline. This comprehensive information service was made available to every household in the country.

As the following report shows, success of this kind requires a new level of professionalism and a more complete approach to campaign planning and implementation.

Main Findings from all the referendums

1. The EU has failed to communicate its role and benefits to the citizens of member states. As a result the ideal of European integration is increasingly being subsumed under a view of the EU governing and legislative bodies as meddling and aloof, with little understanding of, or relevance to the lives of the people they purport to represent
2. Advertising has been widely used to influence opinions towards European integration in the context EU membership referendums. But success or failure of such campaigns depends upon a new approach to political advertising in which a broad range of media and *communications disciplines are used in conjunction over a long period.* There is also considerable evidence to suggest that the task of explaining the often confusing implications of European integrations *requires a more personal approach to voters* through direct mail and phone information lines.
3. There is more resistance to the idea and content of political campaigns in countries where advertising is least well used as a commercial tool. This is especially notable in Sweden and Norway where commercial television was first introduced in the beginning of the 1990s.

The multi-disciplined campaign in Austria to support the case for EU membership was extraordinarily successful and stands as a case study of how best to communicate the values of a united Europe to an entire population.

AUSTRIA - The EU Referendum

On June 12, 1994 the Austrians voted in favour of EU membership. The margin - 66% for, and 34% against - was far wider than the opinion polls had predicted. The difference between the "Yes" and the "No" votes was also far greater than in any other country.

The role of Mass Media and Advertising in connection with the EU referendum

The dominant pro EU lobby was composed of the Government, the leading parties and some large industrial organisations. Advertising for the campaign was very professional. *The pro-EU campaign started **more than a year** before the referendum.*

The budget, according to Nielsen Media Research, was: 47,841,000 Austrian Shillings (about £2,400,000). 99% of the funds came from the State and were all spent on the Yes side unlike other countries who funded both sides. [Would be illegal in UK under PPERA]

The communication strategy developed by the advertising agency, *Demner & Merlicek* comprised three pillars:

- Advertising
- PR
- Involvement of politicians

and was conducted in five phases. The media used were TV, print, direct mail (brochures, books letters, disks) and teletext.

- 1) Make the campaign offer personal advantages to the individual voter.
- 2) Create an appetite for information.
- 3) Make the voter want to create his/her own opinion.
- 4) Make it clear that the voters own opinion counts and that it is taken seriously in the end
- 5) Create a Euro-feeling
- 6) Make people vote "yes" to Europe.

Books and brochures were of high quality, well designed and easy to read but approached the subject in a thorough and responsible way.

TV commercials were reinforced by print ads using the same personalities and some of the same slogans and arguments. The print ads were kept in a simple style, with a short and clear text.

- *Austria stays neutral and that's for sure!*
- *Our building industry will have more chances in the future, and that's for sure!*
- *There will be no increases in prices, rent and social expenses, and that's for sure!*
- *Together or alone?*
- *There will be no sell-out of our national heritage, and that's for sure!*

The TV creative strategy was similar to that of the Scandinavian countries i.e. putting forward the pros and the cons and then concluding that membership offers more benefits than disadvantages. However the Austrian work was of higher quality and ran over a longer period and was more carefully integrated with work in other media.

The Effects of the Campaign

Bundeskanzler, Franz Vranitzky said on the night of the referendum "...the work of the advertising agency has obviously not been wasted*otherwise we would not have achieved this kind of success*". His comment was based on the results of IFES research to measure campaign effectiveness

IFES research carried out on referendum day produced the following results:

- 73% of the voters could recall the last poster of the campaign (in comparison, Benetton, as a brand, was only recognised by 55% according to Gallup research).
- Despite criticism of the campaign, 63% of all Austrians regarded the information material as "trustworthy", and almost as "trustworthy" as quality newspapers. This is 20% more "trustworthy" than, for example, the tabloid "Taglich Alles".
- The slogan "Gemeinsam statt einsam" (A part, Not apart) was just as sympathetic sounding as "Wir sind Europa" (We are Europe): the majority of the population (53%) rated the slogans "very good" and "good".

And even 31% of the "No" voters rated these slogans "very good" and "good".

- IFES said that the TV commercials had been extremely effective. Of all voters who had seen the ad called "Identitat" (Identity), 35% had changed their attitude to become pro-EU.

Overall IFES research findings

- Recall percentage of ads was very high: 86% (Coca Cola: 46%)
- Europe-awareness" had almost tripled since the start of the EU advertising: (1991:16%, 1993:34%, 1994: 46%)
- The proportion of people saying they were not interested in the EU issue was reduced by almost 50% within a year; i.e. only 40% of Austrians said they were not interested in the EU issue compared with 85% a year before.
- The information-offer was well received by the Austrians:

420,000 examples of the "Europa-Buch" ("Euro -Book") were ordered.

21,500 phone calls were received at the "Europa-Telefon" (Euro-phone" line).

63% thought that the information offered by the Government was "trust-worthy".

- The majority of voters felt that they were "very well informed" to "well informed".

The proportion of people who felt they were "very well informed" to "well informed" increased from 29% to 47% during the last 12 months before the referendum. On the day of the referendum 80% felt that they were at least well informed.

Recent research shows that only 8.3% of Austrians are normally influenced by commercials, however this proportion was 27% in connection with the EU-Campaign.

In a recently published research study by "ISMA" 23% thought that ".....the Government's campaign had considerable influence on the final result".

According to this research the advertising and communication programme worked very effectively and there was no doubt that voters had taken the Austrian campaign into account when voting.

Another reason why the campaign worked so well was the co-operation between the campaign organisers and politicians in the last few weeks before the referendum.

The success was reflected in the final result - a vote (66.6%) for EU membership.

'Yes' Campaign Strengths / Weaknesses

Integrated approach: The campaign combined all marketing / communications disciplines and media to achieve maximum impact and relevance.

1. *Focused:* the advertising gave a clear message.
2. *Pooled Resources:* the campaign organisers made maximum use of available funds.
3. *Accessible Information:* Everyone had access to well designed comprehensive information packs.
4. *A Personal Approach:* An information hotline was set up to answer voter questions.
5. *Simple Message:* Having given voters access to information, the advertising could be used to hammer home a clear message.
6. *Long-running campaign:* Organisers allowed plenty of time for their campaign to build support using PR and other methods prior to the main campaign.
7. *Respect for Voters:* The campaign acknowledged the importance of the vote to the country's people and was carried out in a way that reflected this.
8. *Politicians Involved:* Close co-operation between politicians and campaign organisers provided extra force.

Bibliography

Anton Pelinka and Sylvia Griederer note "the combined effect was to produce a larger 'Yes' vote (67%) than anyone had expected".

- Anton Pelinka (and others), "EU Referendum - Zur Praxis direkter Demokratie in Österreich" Schriftenreihe des Zentrums für angewandte Politikforschung 1994.
- IFES Research, Vienna June 29, 1994
- "Reflection on Information and Communication Policy of the European Community", by a group of communications experts chaired by Mr Willy de Clercq, Member of the European Parliament, March 1993.