

# Media Audiences and the Public

## Case Study

### Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 (Singapore)



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## **Abstract**

The Yellow Ribbon Project is a series of campaigns conveying the message that ex-convicts deserve a second chance to be reintegrated back into the society. This case study explores one of the Yellow Ribbon Project campaigns held in 2008. The various creative, media and research strategies are examined, leading to an analysis which hired a few relevant theories to determine the success of the campaign. The study found that the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 is effective in cognitive and attitudinal change, as awareness and acceptance were generated. However, behavioural change was not achieved. A few considerations are discussed to recommend better outcome for future campaigns.

## **1. Introduction**

Launched in 2004, the Yellow Ribbon Project is a cause championed by the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-Offenders (CARE) Network. This network is made up of both community organisations and government agencies such as the Singapore After-Care Association and the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Each year, the rolled out campaigns make use of posters, television advertisements, conferences and different events to bring across the message to the public that they should give ex-convicts a chance to reintegrate back into society.

For this case study, the focus is on the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 which kicked-off on 7 May 2008 and ended on 23 November 2008.

The theme for the 2008 campaign was, "The Yellow Ribbon Project. Giving ex-offenders a second chance. Beyond just words," and the aims of the campaign was to:

1. Raise awareness of the need to give second chances to ex-offenders and their families.

2. Generate acceptance of ex-offenders and their families in the communities.
3. Inspire community action to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders back into society.

([www.yellowribbon.org.sg](http://www.yellowribbon.org.sg): Our objectives)

Because the Yellow Ribbon Project aimed to help ex-offenders “unlock the second prison,” the target audience for the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 was, as with all previous years, the Singapore public and employers. The rationale behind the need to help these ex-offenders “unlock the second prison” was due to the social stigma and discrimination that ex-offenders face after they are released.

Every year, more than 11,000 inmates are released and if society does not give them a second chance, then these ex-offenders would serve finish their prison sentences only to be incarcerated again by society to yet another prison.

According to the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE), the social prison that society creates for ex-offenders is “one that can be more punishing than the prison sentence itself” because it is one that is filled with “invincible bars, suspicion, mistrust and discrimination.”

## **2. The Campaign**

### **2.1 Creative Strategy**

The creative execution of the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 included events that reached out to the whole Singapore community to show them how ex-offenders can give back to the society if they had a chance to do so.

An example of a strategy to reach out to the population was the putting up of the 2008 Yellow Ribbon Project's two posters at bus stops all over Singapore. The first poster featured a heavily tattooed male and carried the message "Help remove the label of prejudice," while the second poster had bold black headlines which read "Ex-Drug User Now High on Inspiring Youths" (refer to appendices 1 and 2).

Apart from the usage of posters to bring the message across, the "Wear a Yellow Ribbon Sales Day" initiative on 29 August 2008 encouraged people to buy and pin on specially-made yellow ribbons during the month of September. This was for people to show their acceptance and support toward ex-convicts and their families. At two dollars apiece, the proceeds from the sales were channelled to other rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

Other creative executions included the:

1. *Yellow Ribbon Art Competition*

The Yellow Ribbon Art Competition kick started the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 on 7 May 2008. The Singapore Prison Service Annual Report 2008 states that, "Building on the theme of "Re-connection", [the Yellow Ribbon Project] encouraged inmates to re-establish ties with their families, the community, their faith, work and themselves through their works of art." This competition was also the first time where community partners such as the National Institute of Education and LaSelle collaborated with inmates, symbolising the "co-operation necessary to rehabilitate inmates." (Singapore Prison Service Annual Report 2008)

2. *Yellow Ribbon Song Writing Competition*

The 2008 Yellow Ribbon Song Writing Competition was the fifth instalment of the yearly event since its launch in 2004. It allowed inmates to showcase their musical

talents and dedicate their song compositions to loved ones. 15 minutes of contact time was also given to inmates and their families and friends.

### 3. *Celebrating Second Chances Concert and Award Ceremony*

The Celebrating Second Chances Concert was held at Max Pavilion at Singapore Expo and featured famous Asian celebrities such as Wakin Chau, Dick Lee, Mi Lu Bing and Mark Lee performing alongside 20 inmates and ex-offenders. The aim of the concert was to give ex-offenders a voice of their own and a platform to showcase their musical talents. The purpose of the concert was also to highlight how a simple act of acceptance by society can transform the lives of reformed ex-offenders. The concert sold-out in three weeks and drew a crowd of 9,000 people.

Held on the same day as the Celebrating Second Chances Concert, the award ceremony “honoured reformed ex-offenders who have stayed crime and drug free.” The award ceremony also gave special recognition to “individuals or organizations who helped in their transformation.” (Yellow Ribbon Project)

### 4. *Crossroads, the Yellow Ribbon Journey*

“Crossroads, the Yellow Ribbon Journey” in 2008 was the Yellow Ribbons Project first ever “experiential exhibition” since the inauguration of the campaign back in 2004. (TODAY: “A Peek at Life in Jail”, 14 September 2008)

This exhibition was held from 12 to 14 September 2008 at the Marina Square Central Atrium and provided the public the chance to understand the struggles that inmates and ex-offenders go through while being incarcerated. The exhibition provided true-life accounts about prison life and visitors to the exhibition could also take part in

“mock interviews with employers to better understand the challenges ex-offenders face in securing employment.” (TODAY: “A Peek at Life in Jail”, 14 September 2008)

Because the creative execution of this exhibition allowed the public to experience firsthand the suffering that inmates and ex-offenders go through, the public would thus be made aware of the strong need to give reformed ex-offenders another chance in society.

#### *5. Yellow Ribbon Community Art Exhibition*

The Yellow Ribbon Community Art Exhibition had the central theme of “Re-Connection” and was held at the Singapore Botanic Gardens Botany Centre from 10am to 6pm over a period of three days from 20 to 23 November 2008. 70 artworks by prison inmates were showcased at the event and members of the public could purchase selected art pieces to raise money for charities. (Straits Times: “Art for Redemption”, 20 November 2008.)

#### *6. Yellow Ribbon Conference*

“Aftercare: A Collaborative Approach” was the name of the 2008 Yellow Ribbon Conference which 467 foreign delegates, government officials, academics, aftercare professionals and community partners attended. It was a conference where both local and overseas practitioners “shared their best practices on the reintegration of ex-offenders into society.” (Yellow Ribbon Project) The conference also portrayed the dedication that the CARE Network had in helping ex-offenders find a place in society.

## **2.2 Media Strategy**

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 had been allocated a budget of \$800,000 Singapore dollars for the promotion and execution of the

campaign through a series of posters, television advertisements, radio commercials and events such as concerts, exhibitions and award ceremonies.

### ***Limitations***

As much as I would have liked to present a conclusive breakdown on how the \$0.8 million budget had been used in the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008, I was limited in the obtainment of additional information. Citing confidentiality issues, Up Brandbuzz (the agency which tendered and won the bid for the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008), could not release additional information on the breakdown of the campaign's budget. Even though I was limited on information pertaining to the breakdown of the campaign's budget, I firmly believe that a case study on the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 is still warranted because there is much to learn on how a public relations campaign can be carried out successfully on "taboo" issues – which was, in this instance, the "taboo" issue of the need to give ex-convicts a second chance.

I also believe that while the budget breakdown limitation might hinder us in purporting the best media strategy findings, it would not prevent me from presenting an accurate study on the channels that the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 used to successfully launch and carry out its campaign.

### ***Press Releases***

Because the campaigns held in previous years had already been successful in creating awareness, the aim of the 2008 Yellow Ribbon Project was then to leverage on that awareness and go one step further – to encourage society to go "beyond just words" in helping reformed ex-offenders reintegrate back into society.

Press releases were used to inform the media in Singapore of the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 launch and the campaign, as with many government initiatives, received extensive coverage in the media.

The press release, “Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 Expedites Reintegration for Ex-Offenders,” by the Singapore Prison Service on 13 August 2008 was approximately two weeks before the launch of the campaign on 29 August 2008. It highlighted the rationale behind the need to give ex-offenders a second chance and also informed of the line-up of events that would be rolled out for the 2008 campaign.

Another press release by the Singapore Prison Services on 6 September 2008, “Yellow Ribbon Project Celebrates Second Chances with Ex-Offenders and Their Heroes,” informed of the Celebrating Second Chances Concert and the media in Singapore gave coverage to the event, leading to a sold-out concert of a 9,000 strong crowd.

### ***Vodcasts***

According to the Encyclopaedia of Educational Technology, vodcasts are “multimedia files that contain both video and audio content.”

The Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 included a 1 minute and 12 seconds vodcast by the Singapore Prison Services titled “Beyond Just Words”. The vodcast was available in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, and it once again brought across the message of the need to give reformed ex-offenders a chance to reintegrate back into society.

The vodcasts went viral on social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook which further served as an extra media strategy in the promotion of the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 campaign.

## ***Social Media Platforms***

Social media platforms are online communities such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter which allow people who share similar interests to interact with each other. These communities of people use videos and blogs to share information and thoughts on all sorts of issues.

The 2008 Yellow Ribbon Project's "Beyond Just Words" vodcast was uploaded onto YouTube and Facebook, and went viral. Because social media are generally used by youths, the campaign was able to reach out to youths in Singapore.

### **2.3 Research Strategy**

A mixture of qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (surveys) methods were used in both pre and post-campaign research.

The Public Perception Survey 2008 conducted by Singapore Prison Service's Research and Planning Branch to "examine the level of awareness, confidence and support for the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts" of ex-offenders found that many Singaporeans were aware that the yellow ribbon represents giving a second chance to ex-offenders. It was also found that 88 percent of the respondents were able to identify the objectives of Yellow Ribbon Project without being prompted. (Singapore Prison Service Annual Report 2008)

However, while the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 was able to create awareness of the plight of reformed ex-offenders, research also showed that more community action was needed to support the reintegration of ex-offenders back into society.

A survey conducted by Hwa Chong Institution to find out if society was willing to give ex-convicts another chance and whether the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 was a success

showed that while “Singaporeans are willing to accept ex-convicts into the society and give them another chance, community action to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders is negligible among Singaporeans.”

### **3. Analysis**

#### *3.1 Characteristics and strategies of a successful campaign*

Rogers and Storey (1987) stated that there are four key characteristics defining a campaign: it is purposive, where specific outcomes are stated and whether it is aimed for at an individual or societal level; it is aimed at a large audience, so the expense and efforts that goes into making the campaign can be justified; there is always a timeline; and for every successful campaign, there will always be an organised set of communication activities.

The Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 is purposive: it has a clear agenda of wanting to integrate ex-offenders back into the society by creating awareness, generating acceptance and inspiring for community actions. However, it is not specific enough. The objectives are not stated in specific terms where it can be measured for progress or success. For example, the success of the outcome could be better determined if there was an increase in the percentage of awareness or employment of the ex-offenders. The objectives of the campaign should be S.M.A.R.T: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely. However, the other three characteristics could be seen in the campaign. It is aimed at the public and employers, which makes up a large audience, there was a timeline, and there was a set of communication activities, as stated in the creative and media strategies.

Rogers and Storey also stated four key strategies observed from past campaigns in which future campaigns can be used to succeed: (1) utilising formative evaluation, (2) setting reasonable campaign goals, (3) using audience segmentation and (4) considering the role of interpersonal channels.

The Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 covered more into a summative evaluation, which is conducted near the end of an activity to judge its effectiveness, more so than a formative evaluation, which is an ongoing process in order to improve its effectiveness. Surveys and interviews were conducted pre and post-campaign to test the awareness level of ex-offenders and the campaign, but there were little to show that formative evaluation took place to see if any improvements can be made during the campaign.

The Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 also leveraged on the generated awareness from projects of earlier years to move onto behavioural change. As the earlier campaigns have already created cognitive and attitudinal change, it was not an unreasonable goal to want to evoke community actions. Nonetheless, this goal was not achieved as overt behaviour change is the hardest step to reach, and a lot of time is needed to change an individual's behaviour.

The Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 also segmented their targeted audiences into the public and the workplace employers. Although this segmentation may still seem heterogeneous, the message was aimed at a societal level, so it can be said that the strategy of dividing a heterogeneous mass audience into a relatively homogeneous sub-audience was achieved.

The fourth and last strategy observed by Rogers and Storey is that past successful campaigns consider the role of interpersonal channels, including networks triggered by mass media messages in a campaign. There are no notes of any significant interpersonal channels created, but the use of social platforms like Facebook and YouTube for the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 vodcasts brought about discussions of the campaign among the users. Interpersonal communications are thought to be more effective at playing the role of changing strongly held attitudes and decisions for overt behaviour change.

### *3.2 Cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural changes*

Sparks (2006) noted that campaigns normally seek either one of the following changes: cognitive, where reflection and awareness take place; attitudinal, where there is an attitude or opinion change towards a particular issue; and behavioural, where actions are taken. It is easier to evoke cognitive changes than it is to cause behavioural changes.

The campaign targeted the public and workplace employers to give ex-offenders a second chance by moving “beyond words”. As it was in its 5<sup>th</sup> year in 2008, the campaign sought behavioural change rather than cognitive change, which was already focused on in its earlier years. Findings from research have shown that although people are willing to accept ex-offenders into the society, little community actions are actually taken to integrate them in. Thus, it could be said that the campaign has successfully evoked an attitudinal change, as many Singaporeans have decided to accept these ex-offenders, but the behavioural change sought was not achieved.

### *3.3 Agenda setting hypothesis*

Bryant and Thompson (2002, 40) noted that the importance placed upon particular issues demonstrate a type of communication effect called agenda setting. Quoting B.Cohen, they stated that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about”.

Campaigns are almost always agenda set. The Yellow Ribbon Campaign 2008 aimed to integrate ex-offenders into the society by persuading the public to change their perception of these ex-prisoners with actions. Thus, it could be said that the Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 had an agenda set: they sought to achieve their goals by shaping the public opinion.

## **4. Conclusion**

The Yellow Ribbon Project 2008 employed various creative and media strategies which attracted attention and generated widespread awareness. This was confirmed by the post-campaign research which found that many were aware of that the campaign was about giving second chances to ex-offenders and 88% were able to identify objectives. Many Singaporeans also became willing to accept ex-offenders back into the society. Cognitive and attitudinal changes were achieved. However, the goal of inspiring community actions was not as successful. Overt behaviour change was not achieved.

The campaign had a few characteristics and strategies in line with Rogers and Storey observations of successful public information campaigns, which could be said to have led to the campaign's successes in most aspects of its goals (raising awareness and generating acceptance). Still, the campaign could have been even more successful if it is better planned in other aspects. The Yellow Ribbon 2008 did not employ well the use of formative evaluation and interpersonal channels. The campaign could also track their progress and plan follow-up projects better by stating measurable objectives. The little considerations left out here could make a significant difference and should be employed for future campaigns.

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## Appendix 1

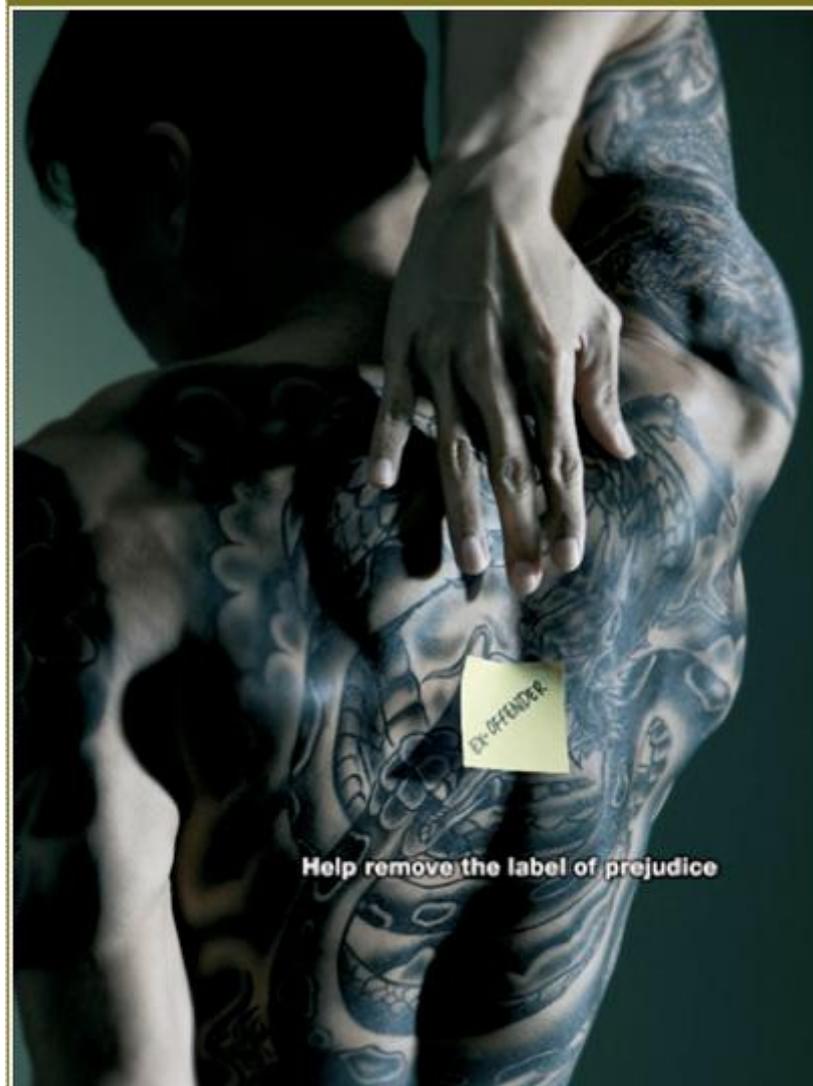


Image source: [http://www.prisons.gov.sg/downloads/YRP\\_Event%20Poster.pdf](http://www.prisons.gov.sg/downloads/YRP_Event%20Poster.pdf)

