

Highlights from Benton's Four Decades: The Campaigns for Kids

by **Larry Kirkman**, Benton Foundation Executive Director, 1989-2001

It started with a cold call from the Ad Council to the Children's Defense Fund (CDF). In 1996, the Ad Council, with more than \$2 billion a year in donated media for public service advertising (PSA), decided to make a ten-year commitment to campaigns on behalf of children as the centerpiece of its work. To launch the initiative, the Ad Council was looking for a partner who could deliver a grassroots network and reinvent fulfillment for PSA campaigns in the digital age (replacing 800 phone numbers and brochures with multimedia websites to provide information and resources for action). CDF said, "That's not what we do, but you should talk to the Coalition for America's Children and Larry Kirkman at the Benton Foundation."

Benton's partnership with the Ad Council would garner more than \$300 million in donated media and establish Benton as a pioneer in internet-based public service communications.

The joint press release announcing our partnership proclaimed:

WASHINGTON – A new partnership between business leaders and children's experts is going to change the way Americans think about children's issues, combining state-of-the-technologies with traditional and new media. Innovation is badly needed, say those who serve children. Despite the ominous statistics released year after year by children's groups, children's issues rarely occupy the top tier of social problems on the national agenda. But what if we could bring together leaders who understand children's needs and the advertising specialists who know how to get adults to pay attention? What if we added in the promise of new technologies and created a giant electronic back fence to get the conversation started? What if we agreed: here's the problem, we are badly in need of family-friendly solutions. How do we inspire a nation to be more committed to raising its children and give Americans the tools they need to act?

Why was Benton in a position to embrace this collaboration, with its small staff and small endowment? In order to answer that question, you have to understand the impact of a set of Benton Foundation media guides, *Strategic Communications for Nonprofits*.

Testimonials

"I loved this website," wrote a Pennsylvania mother who was considering caring for foster children. "It has provided me with a lot of information and only solidified my desire to be a foster parent."

Strategic Communications for Nonprofits

The eight **media guides**, which I co-edited with Benton Associate Director Karen Menichelli, and Benton Foundation published in 1992, covered media advocacy, electronic networking, production, and distribution. As a package, the media guides made the case that nonprofits and foundations had to embrace a comprehensive approach to communications. Communications practice was dispersed in nonprofit organizations – in departments of policy, membership, media relations, and publications. Communications staff were not at the leadership table. The guides set new standards for nonprofit communications and anticipated the emerging digital environment.

Major foundations – including Ford, MacArthur, Robert Wood Johnson, Carnegie, Atlantic, and Kellogg – distributed the guides to their grantees. And with the support of the CBS Foundation, Benton organized workshops around the country to promote the media guides. Benton made the investment in research, writing, editing, and designing the guides, but the foundation funding for printing and distribution maximized the impact. The foundations used the guides in grantee meetings and began to require communications plans in grant applications. Their endorsements of the guides had enormous influence on the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors.

Benton built the bridge half-way and the big funders completed it, realizing the potential of our project. This model of funding established Benton as advisor, navigator, curator, and demonstrator in the new media landscape, where video, cable and satellite, computers and the internet merged.

Launching a living laboratory of media advocacy on behalf of children

We were soon overwhelmed with requests to advise foundations and nonprofits on their communications work, many more than our staff could handle. I proposed that we select a **demonstration project** to apply our eight media guides in real world settings, where we could get our hands dirty and take responsibility for our recommendations. Benton's children's advocacy projects became the living laboratory and test-bed for nonprofit communications techniques and technologies.

The Coalition for America's Children: *Who's for Kids and Who's Just Kidding*

At the end of 1991, Benton became a co-founder of the Coalition for America's Children with the American Academy of Pediatrics, National Association of Children's Hospitals, and Child Welfare League of America. We were soon joined by the Children's Defense Fund, National Education Association, and 100 plus organizations to launch the *Who's for Kids and Who's Just Kidding Campaign*.

The Coalition was a communications cooperative comprised of national child-serving and policy organizations, and eventually included state and local organizations, growing to over 450 members.

To get started, as convener of the steering committee, Benton hosted the first conference on public opinion research on children's issues organized by the head of communication for the children's hospitals association, Susan Bales. We convened leading political pollsters, affiliated with both Democrats and Republicans, to help the groups understand the polling around children's issues.

The Coalition presented a united front, calling for a coherent children's agenda around four issue areas: health, education, welfare, and income security.

One Lexington, Virginia, KidsChamp asked for guidance in starting an after-school program. We suggested she contact local churches, the YMCA, and child care centers, where she eventually found answers to her questions and started on her way to developing an after-school program in her church.

An Ohio mother formed a support organization for parents of children stricken by meningitis. "I assembled the leading family training advocates in the state so that we could provide information for any person responsible for a child to advocate for that child, and maybe even all the children in their community."

One user adapted information from the site to create training materials for a peer-mentoring program in her school district.

A married couple from a small town used the site to research model programs and resources to help them set up a teen center in their community.

The director of a local court-appointed special advocates program in South Dakota wrote, "I just discovered your website yesterday and I've printed nearly everything on it. I just wanted to let you know what a great site it is! I found many resources on your site which will help me in our work. Thank you!"

A reporter from Indiana used information on discipline from the site to refute another columnist's assertions about spanking, citing Connect for Kids as his source.

A Los Angeles KidsChamp asked for help in securing the technology to complete a program she had created to help students volunteer in cross-cultural settings. A Washington, D.C. KidsChamp responded by offering to loan her the modems she needed, and a partnership was born.

A San Diego children's advocate discovered an organization previously unknown to her through the Connect for Kids Weekly. She contacted the organization, a member of the Coalition for America's Children, and learned how to adapt its successful campaign to her city.

In Michigan a child advocate piggy-backed on the Connect for Kids information and outreach efforts for Take this Heart, a documentary on foster care, to mobilize action in her own community. She encouraged members of her community to get the facts on foster care from the Connect for Kids website, which built out an entire section to support the film's release on public television.

Together, we invested in research, media relations, and production. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics developed questions for candidates and the National Association of Children's Hospitals funded public opinion research.

The results of a poll, commissioned by Susan Bales, framed the Coalition's first national campaign, which was used by hundreds of organizations to get candidates for political office to articulate a children's platform.

Further Coalition polls, including "Kids' Clout" and "Great Expectations," highlighted how the American public viewed children's issues. Both of these studies showed, as Susan Bales wrote, that "Americans want to do more to address the problems facing children and families but feel overwhelmed and bombarded by negative messages in the media, and don't know where to start."

Benton organized a brainstorming session with Democratic and Republican strategists, which gave us the slogan *Who's for Kids and Who's Just Kidding*. The campaign challenged every political candidate from city council to President to publish their plans for children. Children's issues became a major focus of the elections in 1992 and 1994 with newspapers across the country exposing candidates' policy promises.

Leading up to the 1994 elections, I produced a *Who's for Kids and Who's Just Kidding* public service announcement (PSA) reporting on the results of the Coalition poll: "85% of Americans want candidates to do more for children." Coalition members across the country got the ad accepted as a PSA by their local stations.

AARP was a key member of the Coalition. It commissioned extensive polling to explore seniors' support of government funding for children's programs. The poll found seniors endorsing a legacy argument – their obligation to provide for the next generation. It was this higher vision that led AARP to embrace the Coalition for America's Children.

AARP had just completed a state of the art television studio and we became the first to use it for national teleconferences. Benton produced Coalition programs for a network of children's hospitals, which, as anchor institutions in their communities, served as hubs for local participation in the campaign. The teleconference to launch *Who's for Kids and Who's Just Kidding* combined local meetings and a national convening involving thousands of children's activists across the four issue areas, setting agendas, promoting materials, and sharing information.

In 1995, the Coalition collaborated with ABC-TV on its national campaign, *Children First*. PSAs aired in prime-time featuring ABC News on-air talent. Lisa Tate, head of communications for the Washington office of the Academy of Pediatrics and chair of the Coalition, worked with me to help shape ABC's messages and connect Coalition members to their local ABC stations.

KidsCampaigns and the Ad Council: Reinventing public service advertising

By the time I got the 1996 call from the Ad Council, Benton was ready to be an effective partner for the Council's signature campaign: we could imagine using the internet for public service advertising and we could produce it.

From 1996-2001, I developed and managed the partnership with the Ad Council to help fulfill its commitment to create PSAs on children and families. The press announcement explained that "It was the first time in the 50-year history of the Ad Council that it is focusing the majority of its resources on one beneficiary – children," with the Benton partnership the "centerpiece of its efforts."

It was an enormous commitment, as the press release claimed: "The Ad Council is one of the top ten advertisers in the nation, and it will work in partnership with the Benton Foundation to create a high-tech fulfillment system to actually engage and equip Americans to act on behalf of kids."

In the early negotiations, I insisted on two major principles: that the campaign would be about acting on behalf of kids – from volunteering to voting, with a focus on both individual behavior and social solutions – and that Benton's work would be as fully resourced as the advertising production and distribution budget. The result was a three-year agreement between Benton and the Ad Council to create the website and the ads to support it.

In the past, Ad Council campaign fulfillment had consisted of an 800 number and a brochure, usually funded at about 10% of the campaign budget. Half of the AT&T Foundation's \$3 million grant to launch the campaign came to Benton to create pioneering digital strategies for public service advertising. The Kellogg, Atlantic, and Packard Foundations provided additional funding to launch a website as a hub of information and action.

The website, *KidsCampaigns.org*, was launched at the end of 1996 with a first wave of spots asking the question: *Whose Side Are You On?* The purpose of the advertising was to drive people to the website, which promised "One stop. No waiting. Right now. Act on behalf of kids. Here's how."

The credits read: "*The Whose Side Are You On?* advertising campaign is a joint project of the Ad Council, Inc. and the Benton Foundation, in collaboration with the Coalition for America's Children."

As publisher of *KidsCampaigns*, Benton leadership saw the value of nonprofit organizations both as trusted information providers and as information distributors to their networks. *KidsCampaigns* and *Connect for Kids* demonstrated a new form of journalism, providing context to the issues and a solutions-oriented approach that engaged, informed, and equipped our users. Editorial content was informed by communications research and the latest studies and reports on the status of children. A press release for the launch stated:

Children's experts at the local, state and national level know hundreds of ways that people can support children's well-being," explains Benton Foundation Executive Director Larry Kirkman. "And there are hundreds of stories that ordinary citizens can tell of how they rallied their communities to make children

A man from Kansas was motivated by an Ad Council public service announcement to go to Connect for Kids to learn about how to set up a program for latchkey kids. He got information about his local Boys and Girls Club off the site and contacted them regarding volunteering in an after-school program.

A Minnesota youth violence prevention program learned of the National Funding Collaborative on Violence Prevention from the website and incorporated the collaborative into its future development plans.

Through a conversation on the Connect for Kids discussion boards, two mothers exchanged information about parent support groups and tactics for dealing with difficult situations in their children's schools.

After watching a Connect for Kids public service announcement, a South Dakota woman used our organizations database to find groups working on behalf of at-risk kids in her area.

A child advocate in Montana used materials from the Connect for Kids Weekly, an e-mail newsletter, to brief her governor on breaking news in children's issues.

A legislative aide on Capitol Hill used the Connect for Kids site to find background information on early childhood education to inform the development of future legislation.

A Washington state service provider used ideas from Connect for Kids Weekly to tie elements from the President's State of the Union address to the work of her center. She authored an op-ed which ran in the local daily paper.

a priority. Now, for the first time, you can find this information in one place and you can share your story or your request for information with people all across America. *KidsCampaigns* captures this information and makes it easy for people to get smart about helping kids and to get connected to groups that need their help.

The site was organized in three sections: *Get Started*, *Get Smart*, and *Get Connected*. And, it was searchable as a resource for targeted users: parents, grandparents, policymakers, media, volunteers and mentors, community leaders, businesses, educators, religious leaders, children's advocates, and service providers.

The press release described the information "hub" as an "electronic back fence" for "people who care about children but may not know what they can do to help children succeed."

The pre-production campaign research revealed that "even though 80 percent of people said kids' issues needed more attention, if you looked closely at their attitudes, you found that most people believed it is the responsibility of parents to deal with kids' problems, whatever they are – health, education, safety or financial security." The message of the advertising was framed by the finding that people were "extremely sympathetic to hard-working parents whom they perceive are doing everything they can to help their kids."

This first wave of advertising portrayed adults actively engaged in helping children succeed, making the case, as stated in a press advisory, that "it's only fair that we do all we can to help those parents and children who are struggling hard to help themselves under circumstances that would wear down the rest of us." "The ads – and the *KidsCampaigns* communications hub – then shift the blame away from individual problems to environmental forces beyond individuals' control."

In Spring of 1997, the next major wave of advertising featured the *Toughest Job* spot with President and Mrs. Clinton – the first time a PSA featured both a President and a First Lady. The message of the Clintons was that being a parent was the toughest job, tougher than being President. *Whose Side Are You On?* was the #1 public service campaign in 1997, receiving more than \$100 million in donated media, of which \$60 million was for the *Toughest Job* spot. In total, *KidsCampaigns* and *Connect for Kids* benefited from more than \$300 million in donated TV, radio, print, outdoor, and Web-banner advertising.

Guidance for Grown-ups was the next round of ads to bring users to a major revision of the website, *Connect for Kids*. Our research showed that some were turned off by the word "campaigns," and that the primary messages of connecting and using the website were more effective. The tagline for the campaign was "When adults run out of ideas for helping children, they can feel as frustrated as kids."

The press release announced that we were getting "1 million hits per month," and providing "links to over 1,200 children's issue sites and 1,500 organizations." We were a "virtual encyclopedia" where you could "Learn 10 simple things you can for kids in your community, ways to make your workplace more family-friendly and more!"

Building on the successes of the Coalition for America's Children *Whose for Kids and Whose Just Kidding?* campaign, child advocates also used materials from our website to brief candidates and educate voters during the 1996 and 1998 elections.

Benton's role as innovator in the emerging digital landscape

After AT&T's initial grant to *KidsCampaigns*, we were able to go to funders that had supported Benton's programs on nonprofit capacity building and communications policy to ask for support. Over five years, the Kellogg, Packard, Atlantic, and Knight Foundations provided major grants to Benton for internet production and outreach to children's organizations.

Benton challenged the Ad Council's traditional approaches to fulfillment and audience engagement. Prior to our collaboration, Ad Council campaigns were focused on promoting changes in individual behavior and on volunteering. But we saw that in an internet environment people were easily moving between personal interests, volunteering, movement building, and political action.

In 1999, Susan Bales, Director of Benton's children's program and editor of the campaign website, and I attended the *Connect for Kids* launch at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York City (now named The Paley Center). There I said, "*Connect for Kids* is one-stop shopping on the internet for people who want to act on behalf of kids. This virtual community is delivering value to real-time communities that want to do better for kids to:

- get the tools they need to make their communities work for kids;
- connect to groups that equip adults to act together for kids;
- learn how well children are doing in their community, state, or nation;
- become a better citizen by representing children who can't vote; and
- give time or money to improve the lives of children."

Before the internet, you were pressed to either mount a campaign to advocate for policy change or a campaign to recruit volunteers or ask for donations.

In this new medium, we could see people migrating from the personal to the political. For example, someone would come to the site to get help on finding childcare. They would get connected to services, but at the same time they would find a checklist for an employee-friendly workplace. And, once their interest was sparked, they could find and join organizations advocating for early-childhood education funding, and for setting higher expectations than warehousing and safety.

Our research showed that users found the site inspirational and empowering. They were surprised at how much people like them could know and do. The curated site, mixing original reporting with annotated resources, was light, layered, and linked, a model for a **knowledge network**.

A Texas user told of recent controversies being discussed on her state school board. She provided the names, contacts, and re-election information for the members of her state's board of education, enabling other KidsChamps from that state to voice their concerns about the condition of schools in their communities.

A contributor to the online discussion boards from Michigan outlined her election strategies for the group, which included asking candidates for their platform on children's issues. Other subscribers responded that they would use some of her ideas in their states and communities to try to make their elections work for kids.

A child advocate in Florida uses the Connect for Kids Weekly to keep state agencies motivated and encourage dialog with state legislators.

A southern coalition of child advocates reprinted an article from Connect for Kids on decoding campaign rhetoric to help its members become informed participants in upcoming elections.

The Child Advocacy program gave Benton the standing to take on other ambitious web-based knowledge network projects that engaged partners, built platforms, and ensured content reached communities to maximize impact. The success of the *KidsCampaigns* and *Connect for Kids* websites set the stage for the U.S. Center for OneWorld.org, a global network of non-governmental organizations providing news and information on development, and the Digital Divide Network, a resource to promote access to the benefits of the digital revolution.

By the end of the 1990s, with a staff of 30 and \$5-6 million in annual external funding, Benton became recognized as a leader and promoter of innovation in the nonprofit sector, mapping public interest applications, and producing case studies that encouraged foundations to incorporate communications into capacity-building programs.

Further Impact

Parade magazine used Connect for Kids as a resource for a feature story on “How to Help a Child.”

Yahoo! pledged \$500,000 in online banner advertising for Connect for Kids, which tripled weekly hits.

Users formed their own connections on KidsChamps, 51 state-based bulletin boards, which were part of the Connect for Kids website. They were alerting each other to everything from upcoming conferences to pending legislation.

Readership of the Connect for Kids Weekly newsletter and Connections, the monthly e-zine, grew to a combined 50,000 subscribers.

After the Connect for Kids Weekly mentioned an upcoming U.S. Department of Education teleconference, more than 200 sites registered for the conference, a number well above the average rate of participation.



Larry Kirkman is a professor of Film and Media Arts and dean emeritus of the School of Communication at American University. He was executive director of the Benton Foundation from 1989 to 2001 and of the AFL-CIO Labor Institute of Public Affairs from 1982 to 1989. He was the first director for TV and Video at the American Film Institute where he produced the National Video Festival.

As a filmmaker-in-residence in the Investigative Reporting Workshop (IRW), he recently produced an interactive documentary, *Nightmare Bacteria: Life Without Antibiotics*. He is currently producing a documentary on science and public policy and is an executive producer of *FREELANCERS with Bill Gentile*, a documentary series on a new breed of international journalists.

His work in media for public knowledge and action includes television documentaries, social advertising campaigns, online journalism projects, and strategic communications and issue advocacy for nonprofit organizations. Learn more at larrykirkman.com.