



Just Joking

E-9901-557

Gold/Grand Effie Contender | Small Budgets - Non-Profit

Effie United States 2025

Brand

Sandy Hook Promise

Client

Sandy Hook Promise

Lead Agency

BBDO New York (United States of America)

Contributing Companies

Smuggler



Just Joking

E-9901-557

Dates Effort Ran

Date From 2023-09-08

Date To

Regional Classification

National

Industry Sector

Non-Profit

Industry/Category Situation

Growing

The Challenge:

Change America's attitude towards gun violence from defeat to hope, compelling viewers to realize their own power to save lives.

The Insight:

We often rationalize not getting involved, but staying silent about gun violence has deadly consequences for our children.

The Strategic Idea/Build:

Dramatize the most common excuse people make instead of speaking up: that the person making the threat is "Just Joking."

Bringing the Strategy & Idea to Life:

Enlist the world's best comedians to show threats of gun violence in schools are anything but a joke.

The Results:

Earned 1.2B media impressions and exceeded attention benchmarks by 60% with zero media spend and prevented its 16th school shooting.

Why is this entry an outstanding example of effective marketing in this Effie entry category?

SHP's goal is protecting children from the leading cause of death in America: gun violence. With zero media spend for the campaign, we relied on donated media to spread SHP's message and shift people's mindset from feeling helpless to believing that they can take steps to create change. SHP asked comedians to incorporate real shooter threats into their acts under the guise of the number one threat excuse: "Just Joking". Audiences thought the threats were jokes but soon realized the reality. The campaign gained widespread attention, surpassed expectations securing \$31.2M in donated ad value and drove action preventing future tragedies.

SCORING SECTION 1: CHALLENGE, CONTEXT & OBJECTIVES

1A. Before your effort began, what was the state of the brand’s business and the overall category in which it competes? What was the strategic challenge that stemmed from this business situation? Provide context on the degree of difficulty of this challenge.

Sandy Hook Promise’s urgent message was becoming white noise

The Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut took the lives of 20 children and 6 staff members in 2012. In the wake of this, two grieving parents came together to turn tragedy into transformation.

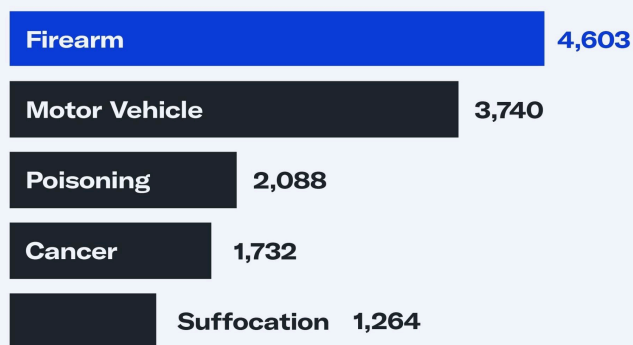
They founded Sandy Hook Promise (SHP), a non-profit that is on a mission to protect children from gun violence. SHP empowers people to ‘Know The Signs,’ which is about recognizing the ten critical warning signs of violence, taking threats seriously, and speaking up.

Before the “Just Joking” PSA campaign, SHP’s business was challenged by high media saturation and emotional fatigue surrounding gun violence.¹

Most advertising isn’t life-or-death. Sandy Hook Promise’s work is.

Guns are the leading cause of death for America’s children.²

Firearms are the **leading cause of death** for American children and teens.



Deaths in 2022

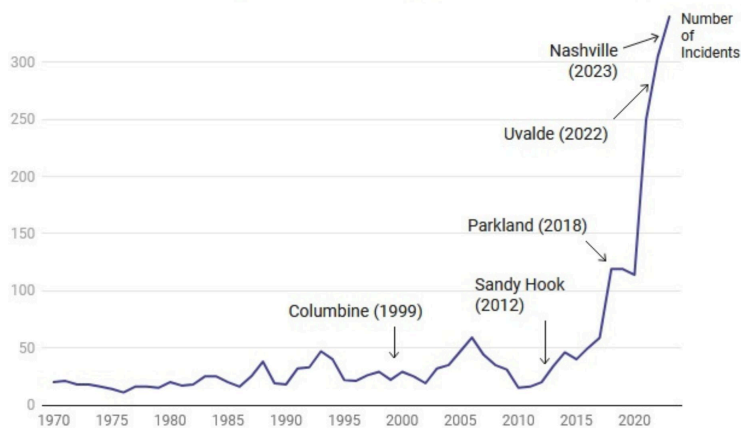
EVERYTOWNRESEARCH.ORG

CDC, WONDER, Underlying Cause of Death, 2022, Ages 1-19.

There were 347 school shootings in 2023 alone, outpacing the previous year's record for the third year in a row.³ Despite the size and urgency of the situation, the gun violence problem in America is already all too familiar.

Schools shootings keep increasing

This is the third year in a row of historically high numbers of school shootings, but deaths from mass shootings on K-12 school campuses are down from last year.



2023 data updated as of Dec. 20 at 9:55 a.m. ET

Chart: Kara Arundel/K-12 Dive • Source: [K-12 School Shooting Database](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datavrapper](#)

Years of gun violence have muted our collective outcry.

The endless news cycle of mass shootings with no real change - has made gun violence - even against youth - dehumanized. News of new school shootings has lost its jarring effect on people - many don't even make the news. Most people believe that they can't do anything about gun violence. It's dangerously close to being accepted as an American fact of life.

We needed to pivot America's attitude towards gun violence from defeat to hope. Many public safety campaigns simply need to raise awareness of an issue. Not school shootings. SHP needed to energize a public convinced there was nothing they could do to stop them.

Business Objective

Business Objective # 1

Objective Overview & KPI

SHP aims to drive cultural conversation and empower people to take steps to prevent gun violence. Non-profits have small budgets, so we needed to **earn attention**, meaning unpaid media mentions.

Rationale - Why the objective was selected and what is the benchmark?

SHP leverages earned attention to grow awareness of its message, draft off and create cultural conversations, and inspire people to comprehend and believe they can prevent school shootings, by knowing the warning signs and taking action.

With zero paid media dollars, we needed to stand out and create urgency amongst the monotonous news cycles to draw attention of Americans who are overwhelmed and don't want to think of the gun violence problem anymore.

Measurement - How did you plan to measure it?

Our media agency and PR partners directly measure attention and conversation around the campaign.

Tagging - What keywords best describe your objective type?

Environmental/social impact (e.g. sustainability/purpose/diversity/CSR)

Marketing Objectives

Marketing Objective # 1

Objective Overview & KPI

SHP's methods are proven and evidence-informed programs that can effectively prevent gun violence. So, we need more people to **engage with our programs and materials**.

Rationale - Why the objective was selected & what is the benchmark?

Every additional person we reach with our programming is another person who could prevent the next school shooting. We have been educating people on warning signs for years. But we realized that simply recognizing them isn't enough to prevent school shootings and save lives. They must also be reported. So, we want to drive audiences towards deeper involvement with the organization.

Measurement - How did you plan to measure it?

SHP's first-party data would track participatory and behavioral metrics.

Tagging - What keywords best describe your objective type?

Advocacy / Recommendation
Conversion

Activity Objectives

Activity Objective # 1

Objective Overview & KPI

Increase **perceptions** that individuals can take steps to prevent gun violence at schools.

Rationale - Why the objective was selected & what is the benchmark?

The narrative surrounding gun violence often leaves people feeling powerless, but SHP is founded on the idea that individual action can prevent tragedy.

We wanted to empower people to recognize warning signs and not dismiss them. By taking these signs seriously and speaking up, individuals can help prevent school shootings and save lives, realizing their own power to make a difference before it's too late.

Measurement - How did you plan to measure it?

Our tracking and survey research with Realeyes and Sandy Hook Promises' first-party data helped to assess our impact on perception shifts.

Tagging - What keywords best describe your objective type?

Positive Sentiment / Emotional Resonance
Reach (e.g. open rate, shares, views, attendance)

Activity Objective # 2

Objective Overview & KPI

Deliver on **life-saving impact** for American children by preventing gun violence in schools.

Rationale - Why the objective was selected & what is the benchmark?

Our campaign efforts with SHP are always working towards their mission to protect America's children from gun violence and stop the tragic loss of life. We want to make sure that Americans find renewed hope for a future where all children can be safe without fearing for their lives by going to school every day.

Measurement - How did you plan to measure it?

Sandy Hook Promises first-party data through their National Crisis Center (NCC) and the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System that work together to assess tips.

Tagging - What keywords best describe your objective type?

Life-saving impact

DATA SOURCES: Section 1

1. Sandy Hook Promise. 'Keeping Our Promise,' The 2023 Annual Impact Report. 2023, <https://sandyhookpromise.app.box.com/s/8rnmta82p0volang65fe3pt0kep6ocu4>
2. Every Town Research and Policy. Gun Violence In America Report, 2024. CDC, WONDER, "Underlying Cause of Death, Injury Mechanism & All Other Leading Causes Graph in 2022". Ages 1-19., <https://everytownresearch.org/...>
3. K-12 Dive Article, "Another record high: Counting school shootings in 2023" <https://www.k12dive.com/news/2023-total-school-mass-shootings/703007/>

SCORING SECTION 2: INSIGHTS & STRATEGY

2A. Define the target audience(s) you were trying to reach and explain why it was/they were relevant to the brand and the challenge.

An overwhelmed general public facing a collective feeling of helplessness.

For the “Just Joking” PSA campaign, the target audience included the core who are current supporters; parents, educators, school officials, students, advocates and concerned citizens supporting gun violence prevention efforts.¹ These audiences value safety, community well-being, and proactive solutions, with a strong emotional connection to the cause. They seek tangible ways to prevent school violence. Our core audience engages with digital and social platforms for updates and advocacy, emails, newsletters, and online news outlets are key for program engagement and awareness.

For this effort in particular, a new audience target was established of those who may feel desensitized to gun violence. Although Americans not directly affected by school shootings profess horror about the tragedies, most do little to stop them.

2B. Explain the thinking that led you to your insight(s). Clearly state your insight(s) here. Clarify how the insight(s) were directly tied to your brand, your audience’s behaviors and attitudes, your research and/or business situation. How would this unique insight(s) lead to the brand’s success and how did it inform your strategic idea.

This entire effort started with a startling statistic. In 80% of school shootings, at least one other person has direct knowledge of the attacker’s plans.²

This ignited an intense series of breakthroughs:

- In today’s online culture, most **perpetrators tell someone** their plans before carrying them out.
- We have been educating people on the warning signs for years, but just recognizing them isn’t enough: **we must report them.**
- We learned it’s human nature to use excuses, rationalizations and platitudes. They let us wave away terrifying things we don’t want to believe are possible and give us an excuse for not stepping up and taking action. But as uncomfortable as it is to speak up, **making excuses or staying silent can result in the scariest consequences of all.**

We sought out a new approach that leverages the power of these human insights and creatively hooks people in, giving them new knowledge and tools to act upon.

2C. What was the strategic idea or build followed from your insights that enabled you to pivot from challenge to solution for your brand and customer?

Rather than educate on gun violence, we found a way to tackle and dramatize one of the most common excuses people make instead of speaking up: that the person making the threat is “Just Joking.”

The idea: By enlisting the world’s best comedians to show that threats of violence are anything but a joke.

To jolt people to reverse their mindset and reject excuses that keep them from speaking up, we needed an emotional gut punch. To do this, we transported viewers to the familiar setting of stand-up comedy shows, then hijacked the shows with the devastating reality of school shootings.

DATA SOURCES: Section 2

1. Sandy Hook Promise. 'Keeping Our Promise,' The 2023 Annual Impact Report. 2023, <https://sandyhookpromise.app.box.com/s/8rnmta82p0volang65fe3pt0kep6ocu4>

2. Sandy Hook Promise, 17 Facts About Gun Violence And School Shootings. U.S. Department of Education and Secret Service Comprehensive Study in July, 2004. <https://www.sandyhookpromise.o...>

SCORING SECTION 3: BRINGING THE STRATEGY & IDEA TO LIFE

3A. Describe the key elements of your plan that activated your strategy. Outline any components that were active in the effort e.g. all integral communications, promotions, CRM program, customer experience, pricing changes, etc. that were a part of your effort.

The “Just Joking” campaign launched in multiple channels across multiple phases¹:

- The hero film drew attention, PR and buzz. It went live on-air on 27 September 2023 with our official partner MSNBC's premier morning show, Morning Joe. Then appeared on a range of different TV channels (donated media), including Fox, ABC and NBC.
- Following the launch, an influencer and social strategy helped gain reach and engagement. We asked well-known comedians (including the comedians in this PSA) to share it on their social media. The work ran on Instagram, X, TikTok, and Facebook on the well-known comedians' owned channels.
- The work also ran on Sandy Hook Promises' owned channels, and via social reshares.
- Ran across Radio, Digital Banners (donated media), and OOH + Digital OOH (donated media).

3B. Outline the key building blocks of the creative executions for your main marketing vehicles e.g., endline, call-to-actions and format choices. If relevant, include any important changes that optimized the creative while the activity was running.

We disguised our PSA as entertainment

Public Service Announcements (PSAs) usually look like PSAs. As a result, people often try to skip them as soon as they can, or at least have their defenses up when they watch them. We're all guilty of incessantly pressing the 'skip' button.

Social media is filled with posts of stand-up comedians that tend to grab attention and maintain engagement. By imitating this style of social post, we reached a much larger audience of people who might normally avoid this kind of message. The “Just Joking” PSA campaign was shot to look like a compilation of outtakes from comedy stand-up comedy specials with a twist.

The ‘Just Joking’ language ran through the entire campaign, from film caption to a custom homepage URL (<https://www.sandyhookpromise.org/justjoking/>).² The call to action “Learn More” sent people to SHP's materials and resources to see how their actions can help save children's lives. We closed the film with “take threats of violence seriously” to remind people of SHP's main message that school shootings are preventable when you know and speak up about the warning signs.

3C. Outline the rationale behind your communications strategy, experience strategy and channel plan. Explain how the integral elements worked together to drive results. If relevant, explain how you changed your spend across channels as part of your campaign optimization.

We contrasted the lightheartedness of comedians with the deadly seriousness of gun violence.

Our communications strategy used comedians to spread our message. By using well-known comedians with a large social media presence (a total of 20.4 million followers), we managed to reach a larger and younger audience of people who could benefit from hearing this gun prevention message but might normally avoid it.³

DATA SOURCES: Section 3

1. PR agency data
2. Sandy Hook Promise first party data
3. Advertising agency

SCORING SECTION 4: RESULTS

Results Overview

The goal was to generate significant media impressions and public engagement through storytelling and earned media, despite the emotional toll surrounding gun violence and small media budgets.

By blending comedy with the critical message of hope and individual responsibility, we turned a heavy topic into an empowering call to action—leaving audiences not feeling helpless, but ready to make an impact. We gained wide media exposure, PR and online buzz, and exceeded both expectations and internally set goals for media impressions, donated ad value and engaged attention that ultimately led to individuals believing they can take steps to prevent gun violence in schools.

Business Objective Results

Business Objective # 1

List Result

Garnered 1.2B media impressions¹, including 500M video views² and 128+ media placements³, -- all with zero media spend. As well as secured \$31.2M in donated ad value.⁴

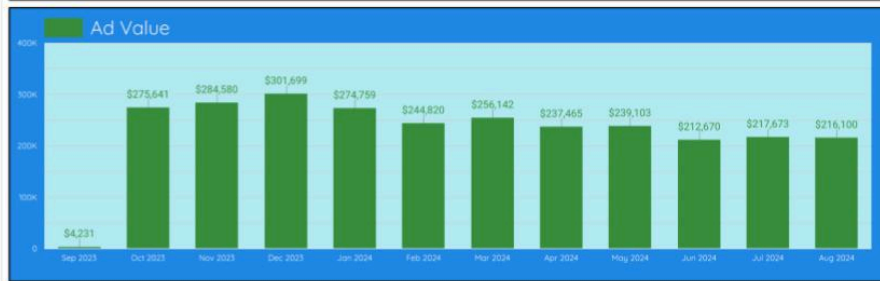
Context

The campaign resonated widely, with 500M views and 1.2B media impressions from over 128 placements, all accomplished with zero media spend. The comedians donated their time and voluntarily shared it on their socials. Initially projected to reach \$22M in ad value (TV and Radio) by August 2024, the campaign secured an impressive \$31.2M in 11 months. Increased ad value enhances public awareness of SHP's message, reinforcing the belief that individual actions can prevent school shootings.

TV PSAs – 2838 Just Joking/Sandy Hook Promise



Radio PSAs- 2838 Just Joking/Sandy Hook Promise



Marketing Objectives Results

Marketing Objective # 1

List Result

Significant uptick in engagement with SHP and intent for people to take action.

Context

We achieved emotional breakthrough with attention at 78%, surpassing the advertising average (68%) and PSA average (71.4%).⁵ In the first three days, unique website users surged by 413% compared to the non-campaign period.⁶ We saw a strong boost in engagement with 264+ 'Know The Signs' guide form submissions and 14,033 + email sign ups over six months.⁷ Additionally, deep dive stories by online news outlets underscored the importance of SHP's 'Know The Signs' programming.

Activity Objectives Results

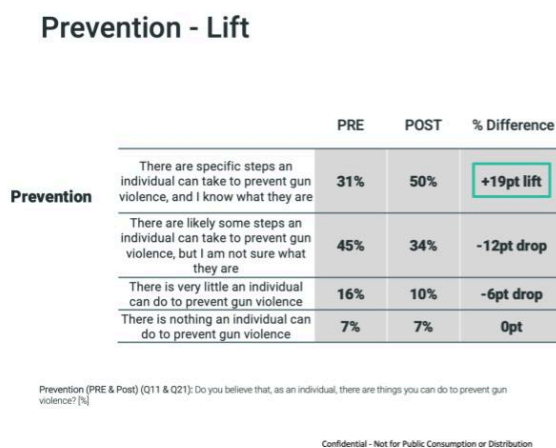
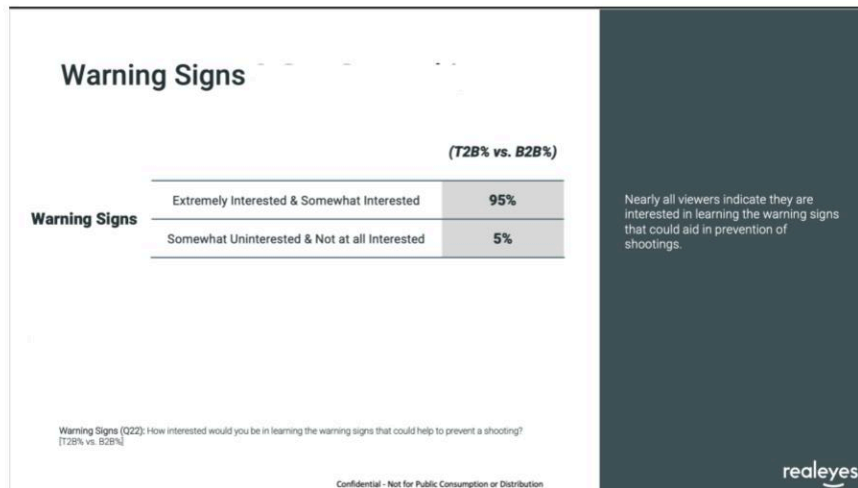
Activity Objective # 1

List Result

Drove the critical metric of shifting people's mindset: from people feeling helpless to people believing that they can take steps to create change.

Context

After watching the “Just Joking” PSA, 95% of viewers said they were interested in learning the warning signs to help prevent violence.⁸ As well as 84% of viewers said there are steps individuals can take to prevent gun violence, compared to only 7% who said there is nothing individuals can do.⁹ Two thirds of people who didn’t think speaking up about a threat of gun violence saves lives no longer felt this was true.



After viewing the video, there is a +19pt lift increase in agreement that there are specific steps an individual can take to prevent gun violence.

Activity Objective # 2

List Result

“Just Joking” bolstered the ongoing impact SHP is making through its lifesaving programs.

Context

Since the launch of the campaign, SHP has saved **226** confirmed lives with crisis interventions by receiving **83,000** reported tips and prevented **142** acts of violence with a weapon.¹⁰ Two

months after the campaign launched, SHP prevented its 16th credible school shooting - yet another community that will not go through the trauma that those at Sandy Hook experienced, thanks to individuals who recognized the warning signs of violence and decided to say something.

Marketing rarely works in isolation. Outside of your effort, what else in the marketplace could have affected the results of this case - positive or negative?

Societal or Economic Events (e.g. changes in economic, political, social factors)

Public Relations

Explain the influence (or lack of influence) of the factors you selected above.

The on-going gun violence epidemic in our country and in our schools contributes to the effectiveness of our cause, because it motivates people to take action and media outlets to donate space.

SHP relies on donated media to spread their message. So, it is a risk to produce bold work that may not get picked up by networks. There are many factors contributing to the hesitancy by the networks such as politics, social pressures and audience needs. But at the end of the day, we all agree on keeping our kids safe in schools, so we needed the work to emotionally breakthrough and inspire people to take action.

But leading up to an election year, gun violence is continually a politicized issue. It is challenging for SHP to remain bi-partisan and stand out amongst this noise while launching these PSA campaigns. By "Just Joking" using true school shooter threat stories, we were able to ground it in the horrifying facts and jolt viewers into action.

DATA SOURCES: Section 4

1. **Media relations agency data:** September 2023 - September 2024.
2. **Media relations agency data:** September 2023 - September 2024.
3. **PR agency data:** September 26th 2023 - October 25th 2023.
4. **Media relations agency data:** September 2023 through August 2024.
5. **RealEyes study/Sandy Hook Promise:** Fieldwork took place November 13th 2023 to November 16th 2023, with the final report completed November 20th 2023.
6. **Sandy Hook Promise:** September 8th - September 10th 2023
7. **Sandy Hook Promise:** September 8th to March 31st 2024.
8. **RealEyes study/Sandy Hook Promise:** Fieldwork took place November 13th 2023 to November 16th 2023, with the final report completed November 20th 2023.
9. **RealEyes study/Sandy Hook Promise:** Fieldwork took place November 13th 2023 to November 16th 2023, with the final report completed November 20th 2023.
10. **Sandy Hook Promise:** September 2023 - September 2024.

INVESTMENT OVERVIEW

Paid Media Expenditure (Current Competition Time Period)

\$20-40 million

Paid Media Expenditures (Previous Comparable Time Period)

Not Applicable

Compared to other competitors in this category, this budget is:

Less

Compared to prior year spend on the brand overall, the brand's overall budget this year is:

Not applicable (Elaboration Required)

Media Budget Elaboration

The "Just Joking" PSA campaign launched in late September 2023. In 2022 we were in creative exploration and development with no spending recorded. By comparison, some of the competitors, like Every Town spend millions on their ad campaign.¹

SHP's PSA campaigns have a \$0 media budget because it is all donated media. Each year depending on the creative work, SHP's donated media amount will fluctuate. The campaign relies on creative strength to draw earned attention and donated media as well as leverage a group of trusted media executives who volunteer their time. The campaign taps into their power, national distribution and one on one outreach to local stations, networks, network feeds who agree to donate media.²

Production & Other Non-Media Expenditures

Under \$500 Thousand

PRODUCTION & OTHER NON-MEDIA EXPENDITURES ELABORATION

Our overall production budget was \$200K. Part of the production cost included capturing footage with 8 comics across three shoot days, and one day during a comic's stand-up set. The comics waived their fee and donated their time to support the cause. Our primary production cost included post-production editing. SHP has an established relationship with production partners who donate their own time and effort to support SHP mission.

Was owned media a part of your effort?

Yes : We leveraged Sandy Hook Promise's social channels on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, X, YouTube to amplify our campaign and its message. We uploaded and hosted the video on social channels and created social media posts along with display banners. The creative twist garnered awareness and engagement with people reposting and commenting about the work. We also developed a custom landing page for the "Just Joking" PSA that included the film, the real shooter threats and 'Know The Signs.' All communications directed viewers to learn more and engage with SHP content and programs.³

Sponsorships and Media Partnerships

Unique Opportunity

Elaboration on Sponsorships and Media Partnerships

The earned media plan for SHP's 'Just Joking' PSA campaign in late September 2023 includes⁴:

- Secure a broadcast placement.
- Garner earned media coverage and strengthen relationships with reporters covering gun violence and related topics.
- Facilitate interviews with SHP leadership to reporters across verticals: Media/Advertising media (e.g., Ad Age, Adweek); Gun violence / General news (e.g., CNN, USA Today, Today.com); Lifestyle / Entertainment (e.g., People, Variety, E! News).
- Work with digital media partners to get donated space and/or display ads in target publications.
- Encourage the nine comedians to donate their time and voluntarily share the work on their socials.

DATA SOURCES: INVESTMENT OVERVIEW

1. Press Release, Everytown For Gun Safety Victory Fund and Planned Parenthood Votes Announce \$1 million ad campaign. August, 2024.<https://www.everytown.org/pres...>
2. Media partner agency
3. Sandy Hook Promise
4. PR agency

All Touchpoints

Digital Mktg. - Display Ads
Digital Mktg. - Short Video (:15-3 min.)
Digital Mktg. - Social: Organic
Digital Mktg. - Social: Paid
Digital Mktg. - Video Ads
Interactive / Website / Apps
OOH - Billboards
OOH - Transportation
Print - Magazine
Print - Newspaper
Public Relations
Radio
TV

MAIN TOUCHPOINT #1 (Select one of the touchpoints from the chart)

Digital Mktg. - Short Video (:15-3 min.)

MAIN TOUCHPOINT #2 (Select one of the touchpoints from the chart or Not Applicable.)

Public Relations

MAIN TOUCHPOINT #3 (Select one of the touchpoints from the chart or Not Applicable.)

Digital Mktg. - Social: Organic

Social Media Platforms

Facebook

Instagram

LinkedIn

X

YouTube

COMPANY & INDIVIDUAL CREDITS

Lead Agency(s)

BBDO New York (United States of America) United States

Agency Network

BBDO Worldwide

Holding Company

Omnicom

Client(s)

Sandy Hook Promise United States

Client Network

Sandy Hook Promise

Contributing Agency(s)

Smuggler United States

Agency Network

Smuggler

Holding Company

Independent

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