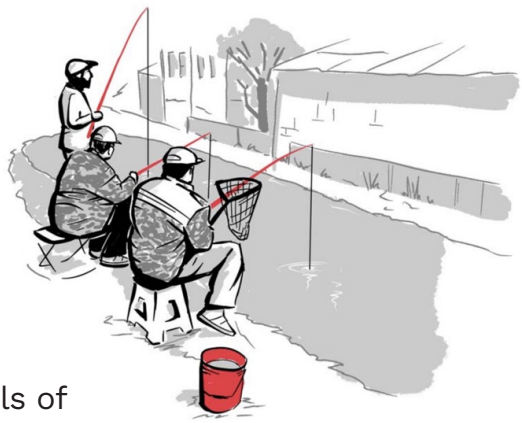
RESPOND CREATIVELY TO YOUR CULTURAL TERRAIN

Pothole Fishing, North Macedonia



Around 2010, a group of idealistic artists traveled to the countryside of North Macedonia, a small Western Balkans nation, with the noble aim of bringing art to the people. When they got to one of the towns, however, the people there didn't want to talk about art. They wanted to talk about potholes.

Big, gaping potholes in the main streets of their town that were deep enough to break a car's axle and create a small lake when it rained. Potholes that hadn't been fixed by municipal authorities for years and were symbols of the ineptitude and corruption of the governing regime. Meetings had been held, politicians confronted, and petitions delivered — but the potholes remained. So, instead of bringing unwanted art to the people, the group decided to bring needed artistry to their pothole problems.

The group faced numerous challenges in their campaign to fix the potholes. After a decade of corrupt rule by right-wing nationalists, most people had become apathetic: politics changed nothing and politicians were just in it for themselves. People had also become fearful: political dissenters were targeted by the regime, and when politicians were confronted for their corruption they lashed out at their critics and accused them of being paid by opposing political parties. In this context, running a traditional political advocacy campaign was not going to work. Anything that hinted at politics would be used against them. So:

The artistic activists went fishing.

They borrowed some fishing poles, gathered some buckets, set up stools, and cast their lines into a particularly large water-filled pothole "lake." Local people came out of their homes and gathered around the anglers. Curious, they looked into the buckets where they saw several fish (bought earlier by the artists at a local market).

They began to laugh and told their neighbors. More people arrived, enjoying the absurdity of the spectacle while discussing the problem of the pothole. As the group got bigger, someone contacted the local media, which came and took pictures and recorded the story of the pothole that hadn't been fixed. The artists shot their own video and uploaded it to YouTube. The story made it into the national media that night and the pothole was fixed by municipal authorities within a few days. Following that success, the artists kept coming up

with new ways to draw attention to different potholes all around the country, with the same creativity and success. Collectively, it's estimated their work led to 15 million Euros' worth of infrastructure projects.

The principle here is one of adapting to the environment. The first rule of guerilla warfare is to know your terrain and use it to your advantage. These artistic activists listened to what locals were concerned with, understood the strengths and weaknesses of their adversaries, and knew the culture of their region (North Macedonians love to go fishing). They crafted a "non-political" campaign that leveraged humor into publicity and embarrassed officials into action.

More takeaways from this example:

Simple works - Use humor - Create irresistible imagery

MAKE THE "INVISIBLE" VISIBLE

Rat Rallies, Washington, D.C.

In the 1960s, rats were a serious problem in much of Washington, D.C., specifically in Northeast and Southeast D.C. — the neighborhoods where residents were predominantly people of color. After total inaction by the local government to address the rat problem, activist Julius Hobson decided to step up.

To start, he bought traps and caught 10-12 giant rats from the street. He then put them in cages and strapped those cages to the roof of his station wagon. Then he drove to the white, wealthy neighborhoods — which didn't have a rat problem — with a loudspeaker and signs threatening to release the rats.

Hobson told the press "that a D.C. problem usually is not a problem until it is a white problem," and so he decided to "go ahead and make it a white problem."

On multiple Saturdays, Hobson held "Rat Relocation Rallies" in Georgetown, one of the richest and whitest neighborhoods in D.C. He loudly repeated his threats, raising the stakes by claiming he had a "rat farm" in the city where he and his associates kept chicken coops full of rats. He vowed that all the rats would soon be released in their neighborhood if the government didn't act.

Because many members of city and federal offices lived in Georgetown, this quickly got their attention. The press also loved the story and wrote about it extensively as it unfolded — often exaggerating the specifics. Within a short time, Hobson's strategy

proved successful: D.C. finally agreed to fund rat extermination programs in the affected neighborhoods.

Another fun twist to the story: the threats were all a bluff. Hobson didn't have any more rats than he had in the cages he displayed. There were no rat farms or chicken coops full of rats. But he didn't need them. He just needed to force those in power to see the smallest bit of the problem — to stop them from pretending it was invisible — to achieve success.

More takeaways from this example:

Surprise works - Go to where the power is - Create an irresistible story

LET POP CULTURE BE YOUR GUIDE

Journal Rappé, Senegal

In 2013, Senegalese rappers and activists Cheikh "Keyti" Sene and Makhtar "Xuman" Fall wanted to get youth engaged in their country's politics. Young people made up 60% of Senegal's population, but most tuned politics out. Why? In Senegal, "politics" was synonymous with corruption, incompetency, and self-serving bureaucrats. Plus, the words used to discuss political policies and programs — as typically communicated through speeches and newscasts — did not reflect language that young people used or cared about. So a huge portion of the population was neither aware of decisions that would impact them nor engaged with the decision-makers.

To change this, Keyti and Xuman looked to the Y'en a Marre, or "We're Fed Up," rap-infused youth movement that started in Senegal a few years before. Building off the success of that movement and using their own talent as rappers, Keyti and Xuman decided to create a news program that young people would want to see.

Their creation, Journal Rappé, is a regular video show where the two artists create a long-form investigative report in the form of a hip-hop mixtape. Keyti and Xuman rap the current news from Senegal and around the world in French and Wolof (Senegal's dominant language). Through rap, Journal Rappé provides political information for young people in a language and through a culture they feel is their own.

The show was so successful that it's been replicated in countries across Africa, and as far away as Jamaica and Vietnam, with Keyti and Xuman offering support and technical assistance. The show, however, changes with location. In Jamaica, for instance, the news is not rapped over a hip-hop beat but toasted over Dance Hall Reggae. The principle here is to engage your audience and communicate your message in the languages and modes of expression that they're comfortable with. For some that might be a policy paper — but for others it might be popular music.

More takeaways from this example:

Play to your audiences' strengths — Speak in your audiences' language(s).