

With Harrowing Ads, Gun Safety Groups Push a Scarier Reality

 [nytimes.com/2019/09/18/business/sandy-hook-promise-gun-ad.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/18/business/sandy-hook-promise-gun-ad.html)

Going back to school means worrying about what to wear, deciding what classes to take and, increasingly, knowing what to do if someone appears on campus with a gun.

This reality in American classrooms is reflected in [a harrowing ad being released on Wednesday](#) from Sandy Hook Promise, a gun safety advocacy group created after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in 2012.

The spot, which will debut during the “Today” show, starts as cheerfully as any other back-to-school commercial, with a boy at his locker praising his new backpack.

Then, the testimonials darken. “These new sneakers are just what I needed for the new year,” one boy says as he sprints away from the sounds of screams and gunshots. “These new socks, they can be a real lifesaver,” a girl says, peeling off her knee-high hosiery to use as a tourniquet on another student’s bloody leg.

In the final scene, a girl huddles in a bathroom stall and types out a loving text to her mother on a glittery pink phone. Tears stream down her face.

“I finally got my own phone to stay in touch with my mom,” she says, closing her eyes at the sound of a door opening and footsteps approaching.

“Gun violence and school shootings are not easy subjects, and they shouldn’t be fun to watch,” said Nicole Hockley, a former marketing consultant who co-founded Sandy Hook Promise after her 6-year-old son, Dylan, died in the Newtown shooting. “The more we step away from reality, the less respect we’re giving to those who have to live through this.”

Since the Sandy Hook shooting, [more than 400 people](#) have been shot on campuses around the country. For many students, the excitement of returning to school is increasingly mixed with [the anxiety](#) of active shooter drills and shelter-in-place tutorials.

In response, gun safety activists are [escalating their efforts](#). They’re investing more in ads, promoting them more aggressively and making them far more provocative and uncomfortable to view.

Guns have long been at the center of a divisive national conversation about public safety, personal freedom, [partisan policymaking](#) and [corporate action](#). In August alone, [53 people](#) died in mass shootings, including [shoppers at a Walmart in El Paso](#) and revelers in [an entertainment district](#) in Dayton, Ohio.

This month, Walmart said it would stop selling certain kinds of ammunition, discourage customers from openly carrying guns in its stores and encourage debate around gun reform legislation. Last week, the heads of nearly 150 companies, including Twitter and Uber, sent a letter to Senate leaders calling for stronger background checks on firearms sales and “red flag” laws.

In a blog post last month, the online firearms retailer K-Var wrote that it had been notified that NASCAR was shifting its position on guns and had demanded that ads featuring firearms be changed before they would be included in its official racing programs. The racing organization did not respond to a request for comment.

The gun industry is known for its savvy marketing strategies. It has courted women and children with firearm accessories and cartoons. The National Rifle Association, before a public breakup with its advertising firm, ran an influential online media arm called NRATV.

In the 20 days after the mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton, the N.R.A. doubled its spending on digital ads compared with the same period before the attacks, to more than \$21,000 a day from \$10,000, according to Pathmatics, which analyzes digital advertising data. On one day, the trade group spent more than \$38,000.

But the groups opposing the gun lobby have begun to ramp up their marketing activity, too. Everytown for Gun Safety, an organization funded in part by former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York, recently pledged to spend at least \$2.5 million supporting gun control policies in Virginia before the election next year.

Last month, as part of a \$350,000 campaign, the group released television ads pressuring four Republican senators, including Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and Marco Rubio of Florida, to support background check legislation.

Giffords, the gun control organization founded by former Representative Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona, announced last month an ad campaign of nearly \$750,000 that also focused on background checks.

Gun safety ads are being produced by top advertising agencies and promoted on popular platforms. Since 2014, Sandy Hook Promise has worked with the 128-year-old firm BBDO on several commercials, most of which have been directed by Henry-Alex Rubin, who was nominated for an Academy Award for best documentary in 2006.

The new Sandy Hook Promise ad will also be available online, and the group’s leaders said they had been told that several presidential candidates would share it on social media. They also said that they received \$2 million in donated media placements from CNN, AMC, Condé Nast, iHeartRadio and more.

In the past, the advertising industry has been cautious about addressing politically sensitive topics, said Michael E. Kassan, the founder and chief executive of the media consulting company MediaLink. But he said that marketing companies now sensed that a

significant portion of the American public had tired of bracing for the next mass shooting.

“There’s more willingness from agencies to be involved in conversations about gun safety,” he said. “Consumers have spoken in a loud voice, that they’re mad as hell and they’re not going to take it anymore.”

In Manhattan this summer, the gun safety group Brady teamed up with the artist WhIsBe to open a parody pop-up store called Back to School Shopping, which sold child-size bulletproof vests and lunchboxes packed with pepper spray and first-aid kits. Brady also worked last year with the Ad Council and the Droga5 agency on an ad campaign about children hurt or killed at home by improperly stored guns.

March for Our Lives, an advocacy group formed after a gunman killed 17 people last year at a high school in Parkland, Fla., linked up with the advertising agency McCann New York and won a top award at the Cannes Lions festival this year. Their ad, “Generation Lockdown,” showed office workers being taught about active shooter incidents by a young girl, who trains them not to cry because “it gives away your position.”

“We’re competing with the news cycle, where there’s a mass shooting every other week,” said Alex Little, a creative director at McCann who worked on the ad. “If your message isn’t as impactful, you’re never going to cut through.”

Last year, an ad from Sandy Hook Promise filmed from a school shooter’s point of view was nominated for an Emmy. (It lost to Nike’s “Dream Crazy” ad featuring Colin Kaepernick.)

The new Sandy Hook Promise ad is the first of the group’s commercials to portray blood. But Greg Hahn, the chief creative officer at BBDO New York, said that the spot, while stark, tries to avoid the polarizing debate on gun policy.

“We’re trying to unite people in the common good of saving kids’ lives, as opposed to saying we should ban guns,” he said. “It’s not about picking a side and defending it.”