Fun with Facebook: The Impact of Focus Groups on the Development of Awareness Campaigns for Adolescent Health

Helen Sanematsu, MFA1, Stephanie Woodcox, MPH, CHES2, & Vaughn I. Rickert, PsyD3

1 Herron School of Art and Design, Indiana University; 2 Division of Maternal and Child Health, Indiana State Department of Health, 3 Section of Adolescent Medicine, Indiana University School of Medicine

BACKGROUND

Efforts at improving adolescent health through mass communication are frequently undertaken by corporate design firms using traditional design development methods. While such methods may create work that is aesthetically significant, its effect on the intended audience is often overlooked. In the attempt to comprehensively communicate content, significant factors regarding message accessibility and impact are often left unaddressed, especially among youth audiences.

PURPOSE

The Indiana Coalition to Improve Adolescent Health (ICIAH) published the state’s first adolescent health plan, Picturing a Healthier Future, in May 2009. ICIAH wanted to develop materials and messages about health topics found in the state plan that would be more appealing to the adolescent population.

In this project we gathered information from youth about their media consumption, existing knowledge of health issues, and social patterns in order to directly apply our understanding of their experience to design four public service announcements (PSAs) targeting adolescents and a complementary health guide for young people that covered information found in the state plan.

DESIGN RESEARCH METHODS

Three informal focus groups were convened within a two-week period at the start of project development. Thirty-six adolescents, aged 11 to 17 years participated with equal representation between males and females. Most participants were African American living in the city of Indianapolis. Flip chart paper was used to publicly record responses from posed questions. All decisions regarding concept, ‘messaging’, form (i.e. image use, color, typography, style, etc.) copywriting, and considerations for format of the print items were contingent on respondents’ responses.

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS

The PSAs leverage conventions of social media interactivity, e.g. Facebook, within the confines of conventional television media, to position the viewer in the role of an adolescent interacting with his or her peers. The semblance of interactivity and participation in dialogue brings the intimacy and directness of chatting with friends online to the impersonal, one-way, and generalized, yet more readily available media of broadcast television, making for more targeted and better tailored communication to adolescents.

With input from the focus groups about the most pressing health issues affecting adolescents and the construction of health messages, ICIAH developed 4 PSAs which related to topics found in the state health plan: binge drinking, motor vehicle safety, obesity, and stress/depression.

CAMPAIGN MATERIALS

Four stills images from the ‘Stress’ PSA. The viewer is positioned as a participant in a Facebook-like ‘chat’ in the role of a depressed adolescent who is hiding her condition from her friends. Self-recognition and identification are key objectives of the piece, which is silent except for the sound of fingers tapping on the keyboard.

CONCLUSIONS

Knowledge of adolescent health issues: Storylines, dialog, and casting decisions for the PSAs were informed by focus groups. Young people often knew the consequences of their actions and health risks. However, there are other costs (social and emotional) that are of more importance to young people. For example, with binge drinking, young people are less concerned about passing out and more concerned if they upset or cause problems in relationships or friendships. Our respondents reported racial/ethnic differences in certain health-related behaviors.

Media consumption: While television remains the most popular method of media consumption, social networking sites play a large role in determining what media youth consume. • The connection to peers and information sharing enabled by social networking sites presented the most potential for effective media communication and development. • Youth also expressed a need for privacy and confidentiality concerning issues of personal health.

Design deliverables: Production of 4 PSAs and The Little Book About a Whole Lot of Stuff.

RESEARCH EFFECTS

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