

Transforming Campus Culture Through Social Norms Media

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Social Norms Media Campaigns have produced remarkable reductions in high-risk drinking. This approach can be utilized with individuals, groups and communities to address alcohol and other health behaviors and promote culture change with respect to rape culture, sexism and racism, academic climate, and other issues in high schools, colleges and universities, and in communities.

Assumptions of Social Norms Theory*

1. Actions are often based on misinformation about or misperceptions of others' attitudes and/or behavior.
2. When misperceptions are defined or perceived as real, they have real consequences.
3. Individuals passively accept misperceptions rather than actively intervene to change them, hiding from others their true perceptions, feelings or beliefs.
4. The effects of misperceptions are self-perpetuating, because they discourage the expression of opinions and actions that are falsely believed to be non-conforming. In addition, they allow abusers to rationalize or justify their abuse.
5. Appropriate information about the actual norm will encourage individuals to express those beliefs that are consistent with the true, healthier norm.
6. Individuals who do not personally engage in the problematic behavior may contribute to the problem by the way in which they talk about the behavior. Misperceptions thus function to strengthen beliefs and values that the "carriers of the misperception" do not themselves hold and contribute to the climate that encourages problem behavior.
7. For a norm to be perpetuated it is not necessary for the majority to believe it, but only for the majority to believe that the majority believes it.

Critical Questions*

- What misperceptions exist with respect to the behavior in question?
- Do the majority of individuals in a group or community hold these misperceptions?
- Does the target group function as a group with respect to the behavior in question? (i.e., do the individuals in the group exert an influence on each others' behavior?)
- What is the hypothesized effect of these misperceptions?
- What changes are predicted if the misperceptions are corrected?
- What healthy behaviors already exist in the population that should be strengthened or increased?

Target Populations and Methodologies (Must identify which norms are “salient”)

- Campus or community populations: “social norms marketing”
- Groups or sub-populations: “small group norms challenging model” or targeted social norms marketing campaigns
- Individuals - Alcohol Skills Training Program (BASICS) – person to person (professional or peer) or mailed

Considerations

- What is the culture of the issue?
- What is the culture of the target population and/or community?
- What is the nature of the message delivery system or technique for delivering messages?

Guidelines for Media Development

- Conduct research to determine campus or community norms
- Promote behaviors which are positive, inclusive and empowering (PIE)**
 - Positive: beneficial, constructive, affirmative, hopeful, optimistic
 - Inclusive: Incorporating, embracing, involving, comprehensive
 - Empowering: Them/potent, control, energy, strength
- Tell the truth
- Use one main message which can be easily remembered
- Use consumer focus groups to develop and evaluate messages
- Keep messages simple and appealing (don’t overload with text)
- Match the photo to the message
- Dose the message using multiple formats and repetition

Focus Group Questions

- Which of these pictures/posters caught your eye?
- Can you tell me a story about the people in the picture?
- What does the message say?
- What feelings do you get when you look at this ad?
- Can you repeat the information you just saw in this ad?

Resources

Berkowitz, AD (2000). The Social Norms Approach: Theory, Research and Annotated Bibliography. Posted on the Higher Education Center Social Norms website www.edc.org/hec/socialnorms/

*Berkowitz, AD (2003), Applications of Social Norms Theory to Other Health and Social Justice Issues. Ch 16 in H. Wesley Perkins (see below).

Perkins, HW (2003). (Ed). The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

See the websites: www.socialnorm.org, www.socialnormslink.com and www.edc.org/hec for media samples and guidelines for conducting effective campaigns.

Alan David Berkowitz is an independent consultant who helps colleges, universities, and communities design programs that address health and social justice issues. He frequently is asked to consult for institutions of higher education, the Federal government, public health agencies, and military academies and is well-known for his scholarship and innovative programming. Alan is the Editor of The Report on Social Norms (www.socialnormslink.com).