

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

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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 questions posed.

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.

CAMPAIGN MATERIALS

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.



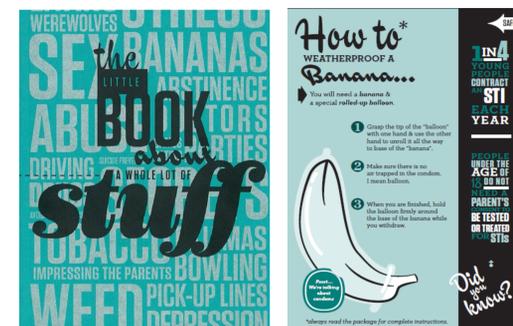
A still image from the 'Binge Drinking' PSA. Conventions of social networking sites such as 'unfriending' helped illustrate the risks of specific health behaviors.



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.

THE LITTLE BOOK ABOUT A WHOLE LOT OF STUFF

Originally, ten fact sheets corresponding to the health issues in the state plan were to be developed for young people. However, focus group participants informed us that they use discretion when seeking information about personal health. Thus, fact sheets, due to their scale and display, were not a good way to reach this population with sensitive health information. Rather, focus group participants stated that they preferred information that was delivered discretely and compactly (such as in booklet format) and included graphics. With this feedback, ICIAH developed a small handbook of adolescent health information, including some ideas on how to incorporate healthy behaviors into their daily lives. The playful imagery, use of type, and discrete title cover added to the handbook's appeal and accessibility.



Cover and a page from *The Little Book About A Whole Lot of Stuff*

RESEARCH EFFECTS

Knowledge of adolescent health issues: Storylines, dialog, and casting decisions for the PSAs were informed by focus groups. Young people often know 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*

CONCLUSIONS

- Focus group feedback reinforced the need to include members of one's target audience in the planning, development of health message communication to maximize public health effectiveness.
- PSAs resembled instant communication or 'chats' that mimicked chats in progress and used other popular social networking features. Thus, these PSAs provide a familiar visual reference for youth while leveraging its social networking function for emotional impact.
- Finally, the booklet balances practical information with content intended to entertain as well as inform the reader. The small size of the handbook responds to concerns about discretion, while easy access to reference information makes the booklet useful for young people.

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