

SOCIAL NORMS:

Promoting Positive Behavior As The Rule, Not The Exception

By Melissa Stern

Using Social Norming to Decrease Teen Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol is the leading cause of death among those ages 15 to 24, typically as a result of alcohol-related automobile accidents and other traumatic injuries. Alcohol contributes significantly to suicide, date rape and family and school problems. It is a major factor in violent acts among youth.

On average, each day, 11,318 American youth (ages 12 to 20) experiment with alcohol for the first time — nearly twice the number as experiment with marijuana. A national survey found that approximately one-third of all high school students reported binge drinking (5 or more drinks at one sitting) during the previous 30 days. According to the Marin Institute, the earlier children start using alcohol, the more likely they are to experience academic, family, and social problems; engage in other forms of substance abuse and criminal and violent behavior; and suffer from alcoholism (www.marininstitute.org).

While parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders all agree that alcohol use and abuse among youth is a significant problem for both those involved and the community, they have not agreed on a solution. Many programs, curricula, and strategies have been implemented, each with

strengths and weaknesses. One promising method that has shown successful reductions in alcohol use and abuse is the Social Norms Marketing approach.

What Are Social Norms?

Our behavior is influenced by our perceptions of the behavior and attitudes of members of our social groups. Overestimating problem behaviors tends to increase participation in the behavior. Conversely, underestimating participation in healthy behaviors tends to influence us to engage in healthy behaviors less often. Research indicates that most people's perceptions of their peers' behaviors are often incorrect (www.socialnorms.com). Therefore, if we correct the misperceptions, we should see a decrease in problem behaviors.



Traditional alcohol prevention programs focus on such strategies as fear tactics, education, and increasing self-esteem. Dr. Jeff Linkenbach, a researcher and faculty member at Montana State University and director of the Montana Social Norms

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Tactics (tak'tiks) n. **1.** a plan for promoting a desired end. **2.** the art of the possible.

Project, believes that fear-based approaches are not effective. He notes that some think such approaches may actually contribute to the problem (Grossell, E. available 2/24/04 at www.aberdeennews.com). In contrast, a social norming approach looks at behavior and perceptions data and focuses on the positive behaviors of the target population.

Social Norms Marketing campaigns have increasingly been used on college campuses across the United States, with data showing reductions in unsafe and high risk drinking behaviors. The model has also been used in some junior and senior high schools. The Butte County Office of Education (BCOE) is currently applying the model in several high schools. The BCOE approach promotes youth development; the campaigns are largely youth-led with support from adults.

Social Norms Programs generally have four phases: gathering data on behavior and perceptions; developing and testing messages; creating and testing artwork; and unveiling the campaign.

Establishing Your Program

Being prepared is the key to a successful program or campaign. This means you need to have a vision and a plan. Understand the problems you are trying to correct, determine what outcomes you want to achieve, and decide what steps you need to take to get there. Become aware of how “partying” or drinking is referred to or talked about at your school. Consider working with a researcher who is experienced in evaluation and data analysis. Such individuals can assist you in defining your plan and reaching your goal. They can also guide you in understanding data.

The following are some guidelines and strategies for implementing a social norms program in your school or district.

1. Recruit and organize your group. Establish a youth committee or club with a youth leader. Select an adult coordinator and supporters. Work closely with those leaders who have a connection to groups of students, such as teachers, counselors, and club coordinators. For example, the Butte County Office of Education contracted with the Butte County Department of Mental Health, which supports mentoring programs and the Friday Night Live clubs at each high school campus. Each campus club selected several students to work throughout the year on the social norming campaign. Students were trained to facilitate focus groups and several teachers helped with focus groups, marketing, and design.

2. Identify and educate your key supporters. Everyone involved needs to understand the social norming theory and the goals of your program. Be sure those who have agreed to support the youth leaders are aware of the time commitment.

3. Establish a budget: Determine how your money will be best spent. Most campaigns use posters to deliver the message, but you may want to use other means of delivery. Your focus groups may provide insights on what marketing methods will appeal to most students, so be sure to budget for different methods or allow flexibility to reallocate funds. Also determine if you want to establish incentives for focus group participants, key students in the program, and others who might contribute (artists for example).

4. Create a list of activities to be completed. Determine who will be responsible for a timeline. You may need to modify or supplement your timeline as you move through the process and gain new ideas or discover that something you planned might not work.

Obtaining Perceptions Data

Reviewing and/or collecting behavior and perceptions data is a first step in the process. In our district, the data was collected from the California Healthy Kids survey that is administered every two years. We also developed and administered a perception survey for both students and parents. Creating your own survey can be challenging, and you will need to obtain both parental and school permission to conduct it. If you would like assistance with survey preparation, contact CARS at (916) 983-9506.

Creating the Messages

After you gather survey data, work with the youth to create several social norming messages. The messages should reflect the norm, which is the predominate behavior in the target population. Additional message guidelines include:

1. Make each message simple and easy to read. For example, one question in our survey asked, “During the past 30 days, on how many days did you use 5 or more drinks of alcohol in a row, that is, within a couple of hours.” A simple message created from the results could be, “Seventy-four percent of us did not binge drink in the last 30 days.”
2. Review all the data. Don’t focus only on binge drinking or how much teens drank in the past 30 days. Create a variety of messages from the behavior data. You can also create messages from the perception data. For example, “Most students overestimate how much other students drink.”

3. Be sure each message is honest and is supported by the data. When we conducted focus groups, many students didn’t believe the messages until they understood the evidence behind the message.

4. Use a positive message. The idea behind social norms is to promote healthy behaviors. Realize that we are working with high school students and that we are working to prevent drinking. However, we may want to promote the message that if students drink, more or most of them are responsible and most don’t drink to get drunk. It is imperative to be conscientious about the language you use and to have support and clearance from the administrators before the message is marketed.

After you have developed several messages, create a title or catch phrase for your program. Have several ideas prior to conducting your focus groups. Use something that most students will notice. Be aware of other programs with the same or a similar title. One of our schools chose “Reality Check” as their title. But “Reality Check” was the title of a local program through the courts. Although there was no copyright on the name, the judge who started the program asked us not to use it.

Testing the Messages

Once you’ve developed your messages and possible titles, conduct focus groups to test them. Use as many groups or classes as possible. Train youth leaders to help with the focus groups. The main goal is to determine if the messages are positive, honest, easy to understand, empowering and support the choices of the students. Get as much feedback as possible. Some sample focus groups questions might include:

Sample Questions

1. Do you feel that these messages apply to you?
2. Do you feel that the messages apply to other students on campus?
3. Do any of the statistics surprise you?
4. Which one stands out the most or which do you feel is most important?
5. Do you believe that these are based on actual data?
6. Do they appear to be truthful?
7. Which statistic is your favorite?
8. What do you think is the best way to promote this message?
9. Do you have any suggestions or ideas to create a message directed to you and your peers?

Along with focus groups, conduct intercept surveys where students are approached randomly and asked questions about the messages. Listen to what they say and take notes on any ideas or changes that are suggested. If certain messages don't resonate with students, change or eliminate them. The feedback you receive may help your program succeed.

Creating Designs that Contribute to the Message

Once you determine which messages to use, create poster designs. We didn't have enough money in our budget to pay an artist, so some of the schools we worked with used art or graphic design classes to help. In another school, one teacher handpicked two students to assist with the design. When creating posters, consider the following:

- **Is the message itself prominent? The data and its source should support the message.**
- **Do the messages and designs grab your attention? Students are used to seeing posters all over campus. How can you make your posters and designs stand out?**
- **Do the graphics or pictures support the message? If we're promoting safe behaviors, we don't want to show negative behaviors.**

When you have several designs ready, conduct focus groups to select the most popular, clear designs. Determine which designs appeal to the most students. Ask for feedback on the font, the colors, the background, and the image.

Getting the Message Out

The next step is to plan your marketing strategy. How will you “unveil” your campaign? How will you deliver the message? Some ways to convey your message include:

- Posters
- Banners
- Table tents
- Key chains
- Water bottles
- Pens/pencils
- Buttons
- T-shirts
- School newspaper
- Stickers
- Magnets
- Computer screensavers
- Mouse pads
- Sidewalk chalk
- Dry erase boards

Plan ways to saturate the campus with your message. Place posters/banners in key locations. Be creative. Where can you capture the attention of students? Our students suggested posting them next to or under the clock in every classroom, behind restroom stall doors, and on the door of every classroom. Be careful about placing them in a location where students can alter them or change the message.

If you are using items such as t-shirts or pens, think about how the students can “earn” them, instead of just giving them away. For example, if you plan to give away items

after the posters have been up for a week or two, students can earn the items by reciting the message that is on the poster.

Keep in mind that seeing the same thing for an extended length of time may cause one to not notice it. Saturate the campus with a message, take it away for a short period of time, and then start again with a new message. Use a variety of messages and keep them circulating.

One creative marketing strategy used in two of our schools was to have teachers, staff, and administrators wear a t-shirt with one of the messages on the back during a planned period of time. For example, every Friday for four weeks, they wore the t-shirt. After the four weeks, the Friday Night Live students had a booth on campus and t-shirts with the message were distributed to other students.

Be aware of key times for getting out a message. For example, a message about drinking and driving would be effective shortly before the prom, when that behavior tends to increase. If you have data regarding grade point averages compared to alcohol consumption, use that message during midterm and final exam times.

Ending Your Campaign and Measuring Success

When your campaign ends, there are a couple of ways you can measure its impact. You can take general classroom or intercept surveys to ask students if they heard the message and whether it caused a change in their behavior. If you want to measure results more scientifically, you can create another student survey. A successful program supports and enhances the decisions of youth.



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Youth involvement is central to a successful social norms program, and it is important to recognize the youth who contributed to the program so they know their involvement was appreciated.

To be effective, social norms messages must be continuous. Campaigns should be ongoing, providing a continuing “reality check” for youth perceptions.

Let's Hear From You!

We welcome readers' comments on topics presented.

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