Social Norms: An Effective Campaign to Reduce Underage Drinking Among High School Students

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Outline

• Background
• The Community
• The Challenge
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• The Plan
• The Implementation
• The Outcome
• Lessons Learned

Always remember: your focus determines your reality.
Background

The Prevention Council has worked for more than 30 years to give young people the skills to choose healthy behaviors, provide families with the tools to foster positive child development, help communities build family-friendly environments, and help schools build supportive climates for students.

We are a nonprofit, community-based organization working to prevent alcohol, drug, and other substance abuse throughout Saratoga County.

Prevention Education, Counseling (school-based), Coalition Development, Trainings, Recovery Advocacy
Mission: To reduce and prevent risky behaviors among youth such as substance abuse, violence and problem gambling by developing community partnerships that utilize accurate data and implement proven strategies.

- Formed in 2006
- Received SPF-SIG* funding to reduce underage drinking among high school students in 2011
- Funding ended in 2014
- Re-branding in 2015 to broaden geographic area and focus topics.

*Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant
Community

- Suburban
- 8 Communities
- Sub-communities: Neighborhoods
- Population: 67,000
- Strong identity with the school district
- Highly educated – 53% with Bachelors Degree, 23% with Post Grad Degrees
- Median household income: $82,000
Community

- 10,000 students grades K-12 (3000 in high school)
- Freshmen only building
- Touted for academic and athletic success
- 94% Caucasian
- Pockets of poverty
- Increased diversity due to new industries
- High traffic area
- Active: Retail, Recreation
Challenge

- SPF-SIG process identified alcohol as #1 substance of choice for high school students.
- High overestimation of peer use.
- Supportive norms – peer and adult.
- Easy access to substance
- Difficult to establish trends with 2008 data, need to clarify issue.
Challenge

• 32% of high school students have consumed alcohol in the past 30 days.
• Ranges from 14% ($9^{th}$ grade) – 49% ($12^{th}$ grade).
• Largest increase from $9^{th}$ – $10^{th}$ grades (14% - 32%).
• Rates have decreased since 2008 (9% overall).
Challenge

Binge drinking rates
• 21% in past two weeks.
• 31% in 12th grade, 26% in 11th grade.

Due to alcohol use in the past year:
• 37% of 12th grade students were hungover.
• 26% had symptoms of alcohol poisoning.
• 15% were in a regretted sexual situation.
Why here?

• Three out of four overestimate peer use “Everyone’s doing it”. The reality is, two out of three are not drinking.
• Where do they get it? Parties, Peers, Parents
• Why do they drink? FOMO, Feel confident, Forget stuff, Nothing else to do.
The Analysis

• Typical approach: Harms, Consequences, Refusal Skill-Building (limited long term effectiveness).
• Funding requires environmental strategies: changing local conditions.
• Enter Dr. Wesley Perkins, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Hobart and William Smith Colleges.
• Changing the perspective on how we approach prevention programming and messages.
• SOCIAL NORMS
The Analysis

Social Norms:
We like to think we’re individuals, but...

- Peers are one of the strongest influences on behavior. *(herd mentality)*
- Look to others for guidance on how to behave. *(Simon Says)*
- We generalize group behavior characteristics on the actions of a few.
- It is easy to create a false perception this way. *(All of my friends smoke, therefore EVERYONE smokes)*
- Negative behavior tends to get the most attention. *(Ask any middle child)*
The Analysis

So...

- The behavior we’re most exposed to (directly or in conversation) is what we believe to be true in all cases.
- What we think is true, and what is actually true, may be entirely different.
- Distorted sense of what’s normal.
- Our own behavior is impacted – more likely to follow along with what we believe the “crowd” is doing (even if they’re not really doing it).
Why here?

- Three out of four overestimate peer use “Everyone’s doing it”. The reality is, two out of three are not drinking.
- Where do they get it? Parties, Peers, Parents
- Why do they drink? FOMO, Feel confident, Forget stuff, Nothing else to do.
Many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view
The Plan

- Following data collection, analysis, and a presentation by Dr. Perkins to coalition members, we decided to move forward with a social norms project focused on reducing underage drinking behaviors in high school students.
- Superintendent of Schools was initially skeptical until Dr. Perkins’ presentation.
- Implementation would take place in high school buildings to maximize visibility.

- Now what?
The Plan

• Hired a marketing firm (not necessary). A good graphic designer will also work. Or a group of students who know how to use Photoshop.
• Create a branding that students will believe in (necessary).
• Run focus groups to get audience input (very necessary!).
• Faculty/staff were sent a letter of explanation prior to start of campaign (very necessary!).
“Too Wordy”

“Too Young”
“Just Right”

READY, SET, GO!
Wait a minute!

Common theme throughout focus groups:
No one takes that survey seriously.

The Shen drug survey* results are reliable, here’s why...

**FACT:** 95% of students said they answered honestly
**FACT:** The surveys are always 100% confidential
**FACT:** We kept 86% of all surveys and threw out the ones that weren’t serious
Implementation

Do or do not ... There is no try.
68% of your Shen classmates chose not to drink alcohol in the past month*

They've turned up other ways to jam together
It's a fact, most of your classmates are not drinking alcohol. Stay strong and involved in something that inspires you.


86% of Shen Freshman chose not to drink alcohol in the past month*

They're wired into other ways to stay connected
It's a fact, most of your classmates are not drinking alcohol. Stay strong and involved in something that inspires you.