

A Case Study of Drug Prevention in the United States of America

The Role of Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Societal Marketing plays a positive role in preventing the use of illegal drugs and addictive substances. There is a dire need to strengthen the role of ethical advertisers and public service announcements, for creating a pattern of responsible consumer behavior, while regulatory measures are required to discipline the industrialists and marketers against their negative role. This study examines historical backdrop and looks in particular at the Surgeon General's Report on Preventing Tobacco Use Among Young People as a case in point. Marketers are experts in understanding behavior. If prevention educators are able to better understand behavior, and have a better understanding of the marketing principles used the influence it, then they will be better equipped to effect change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Americans are constantly bombarded with marketing and advertising. In fact, marketing is so entwined with American culture, that it sometimes becomes difficult to separate societal messages about behavior from some marketing messages regarding behavior. This is especially true when it comes to preventing the use of illegal drugs and addictive substances. At first glance, the topics of drug prevention and marketing might appear to have very little in common; however, these two concepts are linked through common connections of culture and society, communication, and behavioral change.

Take, for example, the typical American teenager. Teens in America receive mixed messages regarding drug use from parents, friends, movies, video games and many other sources. While ethical advertisers do not market addictive substances to teenagers, illegal drugs, alcohol, and tobacco are a part of modern society, therefore teens are exposed both to societal and marketing messages regarding their use. In any given

day, a teenager may encounter a variety of messages such as an alcohol abstinence poster at school, a drug reference in a movie, and a television advertisement which markets prescription drugs to potential patients. Teenagers are frequently identified by prevention professionals as a demographic at high risk for substance use and addiction, so it comes as no surprise that some groups are now using marketing in an attempt to combat negative messages regarding the use of illegal and addictive substances which reach the impressionable individuals in this group.

Marketing is defined as the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives (Ferrell & Hartline, 2005, p. 4). Given this conceptual framework, it makes sense that marketing could be used in an attempt to change behavior and prevent drug use. Many individuals have a tendency to narrowly define marketing as something that must be related to developing a business or gaining a profit; however, when prevention educators fully understand marketing, they recognize

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that marketing can be used to promote any idea that satisfies an objective (e.g. reducing illegal drug use). While marketing has traditionally been used as a tool to increase a customer base or to increase purchases, it can also be used in an attempt to create increases in behaviors, such as increasing instances of youth abstaining from illegal and addictive substances.

2. HISTORY

While the use of marketing to communicate and achieve public health goals has recently gained additional popularity and attention, it is by no means a new concept. Public service announcements, while not an entire marketing strategy, have been used by the nonprofit sector for the purpose of raising awareness and funding for quite some time. The Federal Communications Commission defines a public service announcement as: *“any announcement (including network) for which no charge is made and which promotes programs, activities, or services of federal, state, or local governments (e.g., recruiting, sale of bonds, etc.) or the programs, activities or services of non-profit organizations (e.g., United Way, Red Cross blood donations, etc.) and other announcements regarded as serving community interests, excluding time signals, routine weather announcements and promotional announcements.”*

After World War II, public service announcements increased in popularity and became a familiar part of American life. “Smokey the Bear” was soon invented by the Ad Council to personify its “only you can prevent forest fires” campaign, “a mind is a terrible thing to waste” raised millions for the United Negro College Fund, and the American Cancer Society’s “fight cancer with a checkup and a check” raised public awareness as well as funds for research and patient services (Dessart, 2005).

On June 17, 1971, President Nixon

declared a war on drugs in a press conference when he issued a statement naming drug abuse as “public enemy number one in the United States.” President Reagan and his wife, First Lady Nancy Reagan, prioritized the drug war when Ms. Reagan created her “just say no” movement in 1984 (PBS, 2005). With this movement came the distinct perception that in order to combat the war on drugs effectively, the government must “fight fire with fire.” In other words, the United States government recognized that social and marketing messages can have an affect on the behavior of youth; the most effective way to combat these messages was thought to be through counteradvertising and counterpromotion (CDC, 1994, p. 239-245).

The tobacco industry is an industry that has been sharply criticized for sponsoring advertising and promotion campaigns that specifically targeted youth. During the 1980’s, prevention specialists and marketers worked together to evaluate the role of mass media in reducing tobacco use. In 1989, the Minnesota Department of Health documented that mass media are particularly appropriate prohealth channels for tobacco education among young people, who are heavily exposed to, and often greatly interested in, the media. Also in the 1980’s, the Center for Disease Control’s Office on Smoking and Health responded to the lack of media messages discouraging tobacco use among youth by developing a series of national public service announcements (CDC, 1994, p. 239).

More recently, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), along with Partnership for a Drug Free America, has instituted a National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign. The ONDCP website states that this campaign “is a multi-dimensional effort to educate and empower youth to reject illicit drugs. The campaign uses a variety of media to reach parents and youth, including TV ads,

educational materials, websites, and publications. The Campaign’s messages reach Americans wherever they live, work, learn, and play” (ONDCP, 2005). While the campaign, which has been funded with over one billion dollars since 1998, does have documented successes, it recently came under scrutiny when some challengers questioned the use program funds. While the Government Accountability Office did eventually clear the ONDCP of any wrongdoing (Samuels, 2005, p. 24), critics still challenge that the campaign is too ad-focused and that it might be more effective if it were to employ a more comprehensive approach (Crain, 2002, p.21).

3. ANALYSIS

During the late 1980’s and early 1990’s three states, Minnesota, Michigan, and California, used funds from dedicated cigarette taxes to fund statewide tobacco-use prevention and cessation multimedia promotions. These state campaigns are notable because they utilized sophisticated marketing techniques (e.g. employing marketing experts, focus groups, pretesting, pilot campaigns, and ongoing evaluations) to increase their effectiveness and ensure adequate reach and frequency of statewide coverage. The 1994 Surgeon Generals Report, *Preventing Tobacco Use Among Young People*, evaluated these campaigns and developed several recommendations for effectively designing a mass-media campaign. While these recommendations are geared toward tobacco prevention, they do have a wide-ranging application and can be useful to those wishing to prevent illegal substance abuse and addiction.

First, the report noted that in planning campaigns, target groups should be carefully differentiated. The report stated that if a campaign is aimed at youth only, it may be best to separate it from community and/or school ties and to use formats that appeal to

youth only. This recommendation is interesting when it is considered from a nonprofit perspective. Typically, nonprofit organizations, who are hoping to engage in a marketing campaign to increase awareness or deliver prevention, would actively look for partners thereby increasing their networking capabilities, acceptance, resources, and funding; however, this recommendation states that it may be more effective to separate prevention campaigns from the traditional community and school allies. Additionally, it is interesting that the report mentions that message formats that appeal to youth only should be used if youth are to be targeted. In a nonprofit prevention-geared organization, which may be operating on scant funding, organizers might be tempted to choose a format that would appeal to a wider range of individuals in hopes of stretching scarce prevention dollars further.

The second recommendation stated that in the planning of prohealth campaigns for young people, organizers should pay special attention to the critical issues of message design identified in the literature. These issues include appealing to the needs and interests of the target group, using peer models, using image appeals or lifestyle appeals as opposed to cognitive appeals, providing novelty and humor, avoiding exhortation, using celebrity spokespersons cautiously, and demonstrating preventative skills. This recommendation is arguably easier to put into practice as so many current grant opportunities mandate a research-based approach to prevention.

Another recommendation the report makes is that all messages should be carefully scrutinized to ensure they do not convey any unintended effects. For example, antismoking messages that show young people smoking or being offered cigarettes may unintentionally employ images of the social functions of smoking, particularly if the supposedly negative role model is in any way attractive to the target audience. This could also apply to

illegal drug prevention campaigns, as marketers and prevention educators consider the social and cultural aspects of drug use and determine how those issues will be addressed in a marketing campaign.

The report also asserts that campaigns should be intensive enough to ensure impact. Television messages should be aired at times when the target audience will be watching, if a print ad is utilized, then it needs to be distributed in a periodical that is viewed by the target audience. In addition to campaign intensity, the report mentions that it is also important to ensure that the campaign has a sufficient duration to impact the target audience during the appropriate time. This is a factor that is frequently overlooked in nonprofit prevention campaigns; not only do prevention campaigns need to focus on intensity, but also duration (CDC, 1994, p. 239-245).

Finally, the report mentions that campaigns can be cost-effective and cites several studies which evaluated campaigns which were effective at a minimal cost (CDC, 1994, p. 245). While this information may be encouraging to prevention programs that do not have a large budget, it is also one of the biggest criticisms of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign. In addition to being criticized for unnecessarily using large amounts of funding in the campaign, the national campaign has also been criticized for overemphasizing advertising and underemphasizing other elements of used in integrated marketing communication (e.g. public relations, sales promotion). Advertising does tend to be one of the most expensive elements, and this is typically how the ONDCP has defended its purchasing decisions. Regardless, it is important for prevention educators to realize that campaigns can be cost effective and will be more successful if they utilize elements of integrated marketing communication effectively (Duncan, 2002, p. 18).

4. CONCLUSION

Drug prevention and marketing have in common an influence on culture and society, shared communication, and the potential to enact behavioral change. Some elements of strategic marketing have been used in the past to change public health outcomes, but only recently have researchers, both marketing and prevention, begun to study which marketing techniques actually work with prevention audiences. By studying some successful prevention campaigns, such as antismoking campaigns and the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, researchers have been able to document some strategies that should be emphasized in prevention. Many of these recommendations are simply reinforcements of marketing strategy, but some that have been identified include: the recommendations that target groups should be carefully defined and differentiated, special attention should be paid to the needs and interests of the target group, messages should be carefully scrutinized to ensure they do not convey any unintended effects, campaigns should be intensive enough to ensure impact, and should have a sufficient duration, the fact that prevention campaigns can be cost-effective, and that this effectiveness will be increased if prevention specialists better utilize the promotional elements of integrated marketing communication.

In a 2002 issue of *Advertising Age*, Erin Clausen asserts that, "...unlike *Mountain Dew and Dodge*, we're not trying to build brand loyalty; nor are we trying to compete with sophisticated marketing campaigns for ecstasy, heroin, and other drugs. We simply want to make teens more aware that drugs are risky and can derail lives. We want that message in the back of their minds the next time they're faced with the decision to try a drug or not" (Clausen, 2002, p.18)

Essentially, this is why marketing is such a good fit for prevention. Marketers are experts in understanding behavior. If prevention educators are able to better

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