Feature Article: Habituation and Social Norms

By Michael P. Haines, MS

> "Is it possible to overdo the marketing, overdose our audience, turn them against us? The answer is "yes" and when we do that it is called "habituation" ...Habituation can reduce the effectiveness of a social norms campaign or even cause it to fail."

The National Social Norms Resource Center staff frequently consults with active or developing social norms projects. During such consultations, it is typical for us to diagnose and treat ailing efforts. One common condition observed in these problematic interventions is the phenomenon of *habituation*.

Anyone experienced with applying social marketing concepts to correct misperceived social norms knows that delivering credible "true norm" messages consistently and frequently is a key to success. Is it possible to overdo the marketing, overdose our audience, turn them against us? The answer is "yes" and when we do that it is called "habituation" by professional advertisers. Habituation can reduce the effectiveness of a social norms campaign or even cause it to fail.

We are all familiar with habituation. It occurs when an advertiser has run the same message so frequently that we hit the mute button or switch stations as soon as we recognize their ad. Advertisers run an ad repeatedly to make sure we see it. They are often using television, radio, or newspapers to reach audiences numbering in the millions. In such large markets, placing the identical message many times may be necessary to get even 25% of the audience to recall the product. Habituation is a minor concern for such large-scale promotions. However, on college campuses or in high schools, three identical advertisements in the campus newspaper may reach 85% of the student body in one month! It is relatively easy to habituate an audience to our message in these settings. In general, the smaller the market, campus, or community, the greater is the risk of habituation occurring.

Stages of Habituation

It seems that habituation is a progressive and pernicious condition with identifiable stages and multiple causes. Fortunately, habituation responds well to an active treatment regimen. In particular, there are three progressive stages of habituation in social norms campaigns, with later stages almost always following the earlier ones.

Ignore/Disregard/ Numb. In this case, the audience no longer sees or reads social norms messages. They have been exposed so often to the same format, logo, or message, that they have "been there, done that, got the t-shirt," and moved on.

Bother/Irritate/Antagonize/Anger. In the second stage of habituation, the audience now reacts to the same stale media with anger each time they encounter it. Respondents may express their anger by verbally degrading or criticizing the media or the messengers to friends or others. This is a counterproductive form of "public conversation." Instead of the audience discussing/debating the believability of the norm message content, they are now reinforcing their growing displeasure with the marketing campaign.

Hostility/Aggression/Retaliation. If the habituation persists, the anger generates action: defacing /tearing down posters or creating damaging parodies (not to be confused with the relatively harmless parodies that often spring-up at the beginning of a social norms campaign). When the target audience is so angered by the overuse of unchanging and insulting marketing methods that they are willing to spend their own precious time working against the social norms effort, that is a certain indication of a project that is in trouble.

Causes of Habituation

There may be many reasons for habituation occurring in social norms efforts. Some potential causes of audience habituation are: insufficient campaign monitoring, branding, logos, a

the Gathering Place

The Gathering Place brings together news, announcements, and important developments in the field of social norms.

Updated Social Norms Website. The National Social Norms Resource Center has updated and redesigned its website (www.socialnorm.org), which now includes an expanded case study section, a new research section and a press room.

National Conference on the Social Norms Model. The 2005 social norms conference will be held this year in Toronto, Canada from July 13-15. It is sponsored by the National Social Norms Resource Center, the BACCHUS and GAMMA Peer Education Network, and the Student Life Education Company. The Student Life Education Company has three divisions, Bacchus Canada, Student Life NOW! and the Canadian Centre for Social Norms Research. Registration forms and information are available at www.socialnorm.org or www.bacchusgamma.org.

New Social Norms Resources. "Challenging College Alcohol Abuse" (CCAA) is the name for the University of Arizona's model social norms program, which has received a best practice-model program award from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Registry of Effective Programs.

Editor's notes

The articles in this issue continue a theme that has become an important component of this publication —*how* to conduct successful social norms interventions. As evidence mounts for the success of the social norms approach it has been possible to shift our attention away from the question "does social norms work?" to the more important question of what it takes to implement social norms successfully.

The Feature Article on "Habituation" is contributed by Michael Haines, someone who is well-known to all of us in this field. Michael was the first person to recognize the potential of the social norms approach when he heard Wes Perkins and myself present it at a FIPSE grantees meeting in 1987 and he conducted the first successful social norms marketing campaign at Northern Illinois. Michael is largely responsible for figuring out how to implement the theory using social norms marketing and he has continued his many contributions to the field as founder and Director of the National Social Norms Resource Center.

The From the Field article by Rich Rice and Linda Hancock, two other leaders in the field, provides an excellent case example of how to avoid habituation by conducting frequent intercept interviews to assess how a campaign is being received. Both Rich and Linda are frequent contributors to the REPORT and, along with Michael, serve on its Advisory Board.

This summer offers the opportunity to attend two important social norms events—the Montana Social Norms Institute which offers an intimate, hands-on intensive, and the National Conference (now international through the participation of the Canadian Social Norms Resource Centre) to be held in Canada. The National Conference is an excellent place to meet leaders and practitioners in the field and gain an overview of what is happening in the world of social norms.

Alan Berkowitz
Editor, *The Report on Social Norms*
alan@fltg.net

Interest in CCAA has been so great that University of Arizona prevention expert and program founder Koreen Johannessen and Montana's "Most of Us" campaign have developed user-friendly materials for those interested in using and implementing the CCAA model. These resources can now be found on the "Most of Us" website (www.mostofus.org) and include an introduction to planning and program development, a self-assessment survey for building capacity to implement social norms marketing, and a description of the Arizona program. "Most of Us" also offers consultation services for campuses interested in implementing the CCAA program.

"Panel Finds that Scare Tactics for Violence Prevention are Harmful: Good news is that positive approaches show promise" was the headline of a National Institutes of Health Press Release on Friday, October 15, 2004. The release went on to say: "Programs that use 'scare tactics' to prevent children and adolescents from engaging in violent behavior are not only ineffective, but may actually make the problem worse, according to an independent state-of-the-science panel convened this week by the National Institutes of Health." (Downloaded from www.nih.gov/news/pr/oct2004/od-15.htm).

"A Social Norms Perspective on Confronting Campus Violence" is the title of a keynote address to be given by H. Wesley Perkins, co-founder of the social norms approach, at Regis University's "Violence Goes to College" Conference May 23-25. For conference information, go to: www.regis.edu/preventviolence.

**The Eighth National Social Norms Conference
July 13-15, 2005
Toronto, Canada
For information go to:
www.socialnorm.org or
www.bacchusgamma.org**

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single overused message, and too many trinkets. Each of these is explained below.

Insufficient or flawed monitoring of campaign impact. A social norms project must conduct research frequently during the marketing effort to know if habituation is occurring (among other issues). A project that does not get feedback from the target audience can unknowingly continue to habituate, insult, or miss the audience. Market research is how the audience "talks" to the people managing the marketing campaign. Additionally, it is important that the feedback truly represents the target audience. A common flaw in monitoring is to use one's peer educators or student advisory group as the sole source of information. These "voice-of–the-students" techniques are often misleading.

Branding. In commercial marketing "branding" (establishing and maintaining recognition of a product or company name) is highly desirable. It helps the company increase its share of a highly competitive marketplace. Branding requires the repetitive exposure to the same (identical) content. However, branding can be unnecessary and may even be counterproductive for social norm campaigns if branding ends up becoming the "Been-There-Done-That" cue. When this happens, the audience recognizes the "brand" ("0-4 Drinks", Most NNU Students, Just the Data), as a cue to read no further. However, many projects still use branding as a technique in their social norms media, if for no other reason than it seems to be a marketing norm (i.e. " Most marketing campaigns use branding to sell their product"). If you want to "brand" your campaign, consider using multiple message content, many different "looks", and gather feedback frequently from your audience to be sure that they are reading past the brand.

Logos. A form of branding, logos are the repetitive use of a symbol or icon intended to establish recall for a product or company. However, social norms campaigns should not be marketing an agency, office, project, or product. Logos can then become another habituation cue. The careful placement of an unobtrusive logo is not likely to be a problem, but when it is overdone it can foster habituation.

Too few messages. When a social norms campaign uses only one or two messages repeatedly throughout a school year, the message can become a logo or a brand name. When this happens the audience no longer sees the message as important content but rather an overused advertising tactic.

When there are too few messages, audience saturation occurs rapidly. Saturation (for example, when 50-75% of the audience recalls the message content) signals a time to create a fresh new content. When a person continues to be exposed to the exact same advertisement repeatedly they can feel insulted, or that the advertiser thinks that they are stupid, "How many times are you going to say that? I got it already. Get over it. Let's move on."

Overuse of trinkets and promotional junk. Their seems to be a trend in social norms projects to use key chains, Frisbees, t-shirts, pens, drinking cups, mouse pads, you name it, to advertise the true norm message. There are two potential problems with using such promotional items. First, they are static media. A static medium is a method that is hard to change (freshen-up) quickly in response to a dynamic market and the ever-changing feedback derived from good market research. Trinket-as-media is static because the costs to buy the trinket demand ordering large quantities with an identical message (for example, 5,000 t-shirts imprinted with: "76% of Students are Smoke Free").

When the numbers change, the medium is wrong. More importantly, if the market research analysis determines that the audience is habituated to that particular wording, then the t-shirts must be discarded or their continued use may escalate the level of habituation. Second, trinkets as a marketing tactic may communicate a commercial, cheesy, or manipulative feel to the content. It is important that our audience appreciate that a social norms campaign is dedicated to improving their condition, not just another advertiser using any gimmick to grab their attention and manipulate their behavior for commercial gain. When asked, students almost always like to get the trinkets, however the unintended manipulation side effect should be explored as well.

> "Habituation is prevented and treated by conducting frequent monitoring through market research and regular audience feedback coupled with strategic corrections."

Solutions to Habituation

The treatment for a bad case of habituation is best determined by market research followed by strategic intervention to remedy the indicated problem. There are a number of steps that can be taken in order to avoid or minimize habituation. In addition, the staff of the National Social Norms Resource Center is available to answer questions and help you design strategies to avoid habituation and other common problems in social norms campaigns.

Frequent market research. It is extremely important to collect information from the target audience that is exposed to the marketing efforts. This market research need not be journal quality science. It could include a simple

from *the* field

The Mall Intercept— A Social Norms Marketing Research Tool

Rich Rice, MA and Linda Hancock, FNP, Ph.D.

"Conduct market research early and often!" is a good rule to follow for those using social marketing techniques to model and promote the positive and protective social norms of a population. Market research is essentially a way of *listening to*—i.e., of gathering data both *from* and *about*—a target population. Listening to the target population and obtaining regular feedback about student reactions to social norms marketing media can be used to prevent habituation because it provides the feedback necessary to make campaign adjustments that will ensure effectiveness. *(Ed: Habituation is described in this issue's Feature Article)*

Types of Market Research.
Alan Andreasen has noted, "Good social marketers begin by saying: I need to know everything I can about those whom I am supposed to influence (Andreasen, 1995, p. 76)." The terms *formative* and *pretest* are often given to the kind of market research conducted *before* a project is implemented. The use of focus groups to pilot test messages and media for clarity of meaning and appeal is a well-known instance of formative research used in social norms projects. Research conducted *during* project implementation is frequently called *process* or *monitoring* research, and it is generally used "to find out how projects are going so they can be fine-tuned to improve efficiency and effectiveness (Andreasen, 1995, p. 98)." This article will discuss one method of conducting process or monitoring research, and demonstrate the kind of rich and important information that it can yield to project staff.

The Mall Intercept.
Unfortunately, the kind of process research conducted in social norms projects is sometimes fairly limited in scope, generating data only about the total number of sessions conducted and students present, the number of handouts printed, the number of posters displayed, etc. While this information is certainly important to document, social norms projects should not overlook the need to gather—as often as possible—data and feedback from the target population about its exposure to, and understanding of, the normative messages it disseminates.

One way to do this is by periodically conducting mall intercepts. Technically speaking, a mall intercept is a method of data collection frequently used by marketers in which an interviewer at a shopping mall intercepts a sample of those passing by to ask if they would be willing to participate in a brief research study. Passersby who agree are either interviewed on the spot or taken to an interviewing facility that has been set up elsewhere in the mall. It is important to note, however, that the mall intercept is *not* just a survey, as this term is commonly understood. In fact, it is brief dialogue between the interviewer and the participant. Thus, the intercept process allows for both *quantitative* data collection and the ability to *qualitatively* hear what respondents have to say about the media. While the intercept does collect some yes/no or fill-in-the-blank responses, if properly designed and conducted it can also capture what—*in their own language*—respondents think or feel about the media.

Clearly, a mall intercept is a kind of *convenience sampling*, i.e., potential respondents are not necessarily selected at random and may therefore not be representative of the target population. Nevertheless, mall intercepts provide a relatively quick and economical way to do sampling, especially of hard-to-reach segments of a population, and their results can be triangulated with other data. Adapted for use in social norms projects, they are commonly conducted in high-traffic areas, such as a student union, the lobby of a building, or a school cafeteria. Frequently, a small incentive is offered to bolster participation. To minimize the inconvenience and the personal "cost" to respondents, the intercept should be kept as brief as possible.

A Case Example.
One campus that uses mall intercepts to monitor and improve their social norms campaign is Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Several hundred mall intercepts are routinely collected at VCU both at the beginning and end of each semester. At VCU student volunteers, such as peer educators or service-learning students, are trained in the mall intercept technique. An intercept form is constructed in order to standardize questions and to speed data collection. After training, the volunteers are sent out with a clipboard, intercept forms and a bag filled with small, easy to carry gifts such as sugar-free gum or granola bars. Volunteers note the date and location of the survey on the form. Students on campus are approached and asked if they would be willing to answer a few brief optional and anonymous questions in return for a small prize. When the person agrees, the interviewer quickly records some of the demographics of the person and then asks their class standing (fresh, sophomore, etc). In this way, the demographic questions are collected in a few seconds and the need to ask the gender and race questions verbally is eliminated, leaving more time for other responses.

The following brief questions were asked in a mall intercept conducted at VCU in November 2002 to assess critical aspects of students' exposure to and understanding of the alcohol norm messages being disseminated.

From the Field

This semester, have you seen any media campaigns related to the health of VCU students and/or their alcohol use?

     YES   NO

If yes, where did you see them? (a brief checklist was provided to speed data collection)

What was the message? _____

How often did you see the message?
    Daily   Weekly Rarely

What did you think about them? _____

Where do you live?
     On-campus   Off-campus

Your age?_____

What is your class standing?

Freshman   Sophomore

Junior   Senior

Grad Student

A total of 368 intercept surveys were conducted. The questions included four that were asked of the 309 students (84%) who responded that they had seen an alcohol-related media campaign at VCU.

Simple though it was, this very brief survey provided a wealth of information to project staff about the extent of students' awareness and grasp of the campaign. The following data, for example, reveal that nearly 80% of the students surveyed could either quote the campaign's main message verbatim or understood its intent. These are very high figures, and they strongly suggest that the fundamental message of this campaign was both understandable and clearly presented. Had these figures been lower—and had the "did not get the message at all" figure been substantially higher—project staff, alerted to the existence of a serious problem, could have taken remedial action. In our experience, messages and media that test well in a series of focus groups can, and sometimes do, seriously backfire when they reach the general population. The only way to know for sure, of

course, is to monitor this by conducting market research!

The figures obtained from the intercept interviews were as follows:

What was the message?

Could quote the message verbatim	46%
Understood message intent, but not verbatim	31%
Confused message with smoking prevention	4%
Mixed up words/intent, but had seen ads	9%
Did not get message at all	3%

Something else that a project should assess is the frequency of exposure, i.e., how often the target population is encountering the message(s). While frequent exposure is generally desirable, overexposure is probably not, as it can result in habituation *(Ed: see this issue's Feature Article for a discussion of this point.)* At VCU, for example, just over 50% of the students surveyed reported seeing a campaign message on a daily basis, a figure that suggests substantial, but not overwhelming, saturation. Had this figure been higher, however, and if the other data collected (see below) suggested a large negative reaction to the campaign, project staff would have had a pretty good indication that something was amiss. The fact that 57% of VCU respondents reported actually liking the campaign, with an additional 14% indicating basic indifference (not bad, not good), suggests that the campaign was generally well received and that the level of exposure was not annoying or otherwise antagonizing the population.

The data collected regarding frequency of exposure were as follows:

> "Social norms projects should not overlook the need to gather—as often as possible—data and feedback from the target population about its exposure to, and understanding of, the normative messages it disseminates….One way to do this is by periodically conducting mall intercepts."

How often did you see the message?

Daily	54%
Weekly	34%
Rarely	13%

In addition, data was collected assessing students' reactions to the campaign.

What did you think about the message?

Positive: Like the campaign	57%
Indifferent: Don't care one way or another	14%
Didn't believe it	24%
Didn't like the style of the campaign	4%

Assessing Location and Channel of Exposure. Finally, it is critically important to know which locations and channels are most effective. Some types of media are extremely expensive to produce and place, and if they are not resulting in substantial exposure, staff will undoubtedly want to allocate those resources elsewhere. The data generated by the simple question "Where did you see the messages?" confirmed what was found in a previous social norms project at VCU: that "the cheapest interventions had the greatest impact on recall (Hancock and Henry, 2003, p.141)." Posters (in a number of various locations) and table tents, which are both relatively inexpensive and flexible, were clearly superior to all other channels. By contrast, T-shirts, cups, and pencils, which are relatively costly and inflexible channels, scored quite low, suggesting that they might not be the best investments of staff time and project funds.

From the Field

Table 1: Percent of Students' who Saw Media in Various Locations and Channels of Exposure

Checked location and type of item recalled	Total exceeds 100 (multiple sites noted)
Posters	
Residence halls	22%
Classrooms and building hallways	61%
Bus stop	8%
Commons	6.0%
Siegel Center (Gymnasium)	3%
Parking decks	7%
Promotional Items	
T-shirts	4%
Cups	1%
Pencils	1%
Other	
Table tents	9%
Mail box – Health updates	1%
Banner	5%
VCU 101 (Orientation Class)	1%
Student Health	1%
Sit TV	4%

Table 1 summarizes data obtained on the location of media and the channels used to disseminate it.

Benefits of intercept interviews. As previously noted, mall intercepts provide a relatively quick and economical way to sample a population. In contrast to standard methodologies, such as pencil-and-paper or even web-based surveys, mall intercepts are also extremely flexible; that is, they can be readily adapted to swiftly research almost any questions that emerge during the course of a project. For example, in one wave of intercepts conducted at VCU two additional questions were asked:

- Who are the people putting out the campaign?
- What do you think about the people putting out the campaign?

These questions were designed to gauge students' awareness of the *source* of the normative messages, as well as their perception of the *motive* behind the campaign. That 80% of students surveyed knew that the source was the VCU Office of Student Health, and that an equal percentage thought positively about this office (with 13% being indifferent) was taken as another indication that the project was being well received by a clear majority of the students.

Some projects are not so fortunate, however, and there have been instances where monitoring research has revealed that the majority of respondents perceived a campaign to be nothing more than a public relations ploy on the part of the university administration. Of course, such findings should lead project to staff to engage in a thorough re-evaluation of their work.

An Unsuccessful Campaign Did Not Use Intercepts. In a recent article about an unsuccessful four-year long social norms campaign on a college campus to reduce high-risk drinking, the authors noted strong indications that both the messages and the intent of their campaign were not at all clear to students:

During the campaign, we learned that many students were accustomed to traditional anti-drinking campaigns, which rely on fear tactics, and simply did not recognize that the "Thinking About Your Drinking?" campaign was different. Frequently, when we displayed campaign materials to student groups and asked them to describe the purpose of the campaign, their typical responses were, "It says don't drink," "It's against drinking," or "It's to stop underage drinking." Students seemed surprised that the campaign was not aligned with zero-tolerance alcohol control policies (Thombs et al., 2004, p. 67).

In addition, post-campaign survey data in this project revealed that only 38.5% of students correctly understood that the intended purpose of the campaign was "to document that most students drink in moderation or not at all," while fully 28% of respondents reportedly thought that the campaign's purpose was "to address the problem of alcohol-impaired driving among students, faculty, and staff (Thombs et al., 2005, p. 65)." The authors do not state whether campaign messages and media were pilot tested for clarity of meaning prior to dissemination; nevertheless, there seems to have been strong anecdotal evidence that the implementation of this project was problematic. It is probable that a formal regimen of monitoring research that utilized mall intercepts—if established early on in the project—would have alerted these researchers to the fact that their campaign was not clearly communicating the message that it intended. Had they done so, they would have been able to re-evaluate and make the necessary revisions to their campaign in order to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome.

Conclusion. The mall intercept is an indispensable tool for conducting timely and effective process or monitoring

Recent Research

Are High School Students Accurate or Clueless in Estimating Substance Use Among Peers? (2002). Randy M. Page, Jon Hammermeister, and Michelle Roland. *Adolescence.* **V37(147): 567-574**. This study examined misperceptions of substance use in three different high schools in the Pacific Northwest, surveying approximately 75 students in each school. As predicted by social norms theory, "For each specific substance abuse behavior and at each of the three high schools, the mean estimation of the prevalence of students using a particular substance greatly exceeded the percentage of students who self-reported substance use." Misperceptions were found for marijuana, alcohol, cigarette and smokeless tobacco use, and for "binge drinking." The misperceptions in each school were correlated with actual use, so that a school with less use had misperceptions that were not as extreme as a school with more use. This makes sense, because misperceptions occur in relation to actual behavior— i.e. higher rates of substance use result in more incidents of extreme visible behavior, and thus, more extreme misperceptions. While this study does not add new information to the literature, it provides additional support for some of the well-established findings of social norms theory for high school populations.

Using Social Norms Theory to Explain Perceptions and Sexual Health Behaviors of Undergraduate College Students: An Exploratory Study. (2005). Kirsten Scholly, Alan Katz, Jan Gascoigne and Peter Holk. *Journal of American College Health,* **53(4):159-166.** The application of social norms theory to issues of sexual health and sexual assault is an emerging area. This article reports on a Bacchus/Gamma study in which six colleges in five different states conducted surveys in Spring 1999 to assess the prevalence of various sexual behaviors and the perceptions of these behaviors on each campus. The study was conducted to provide data for social norms media campaigns on each campus focusing on sexual health. Findings of pre- and post-surveys reported that : 77% of the students said that they were sexually experienced but only 58% had sex in the past 30 days. Misperceptions were documented, with 80% reporting 0 or 1 partner in the past year while only 22% were perceived as having 0-1 partner during the same time period. Students also consistently overestimated the incidence of STIs and unintended pregnancies among peers. In general, students perceived that their peers engaged in more risky behaviors (i.e. more sexual activity with more partners) than was actually the case.

The authors noted that these findings are similar to data collected as part of the 2002 National College Health Survey (NCHS), in which 71% of 28,000 students indicated that they "had chosen abstinence or had limited their sexual activity to 1 sexual partner during the previous year." In the NCHS data the perception was that most students had at least 3 partners during the past year. The social norms media campaigns conducted on these campuses proved unsuccessful, and the authors discuss challenges that may have impaired effectiveness.

To be reviewed in a future issue

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research. Because it is relatively economical and can be easily adapted to investigate both ongoing and emergent questions, the mall intercept can quickly generate a wealth of both qualitative and quantitative data about various aspects of project implementation. In addition, a wide variety of students can be trained to conduct intercepts, thus providing an important educational opportunity for peer educators, students in public and community health, marketing students, etc. In short, social norms projects have abundant reasons to use the mall intercept. By doing so, they can effectively bolster the comprehension, reach, and recall of their normative messages.

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Hancock, L.C., and Henry, N.W., Perceptions, Norms, and Tobacco Use of College Residence Hall Freshmen. Pp. 135-153 In Perkins, H.W. (Ed.), *The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A Handbook for Educators, Counselors, and Clinicians*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

Thombs, D.L., Dotterer, S., Olds, R.S., Sharp, K, and Raub, C.G. A close look at why one social norms campaign did not reduce student drinking. *Journal of American College Health*, 2004, 53(2): 61-68.

Richard Rice, MA, is the Coordinator of Information and Education of the National Social Norms Resource Center. He can be reached at rrice@niu.edu. Linda Hancock, FNP, Ph.D. is the director of the Office of Health Promotion at Virginia Commonwealth University. She can be reached at lhancock@mail1.vcu.edu.

Copies of the intercept interview can be obtained from Linda Hancock.

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"mall intercept" sampling, or even a show of hands in a classroom. *(Ed: See this issues' From the Field for a discussion of "mall intercept" interviews.)* More sophisticated sampling or focus groups are also useful tools. Use a variety of methods to determine "reach" (breadth of exposure), content "recall" (depth of exposure), credibility of the messenger, believability of the message, and habituation ("Is it stale", "Does it make you angry?") Conduct as much research as time and money allow.

Many messages but one idea (i.e. how many ways can you say, "Most students do the right thing"?). Instead of continually repeating the same phrase, develop a diversity of messages that lead to the same conclusion. "Most students wear seatbelts"; "Students at ABC High School believe seatbelts save lives"; "Students remind other students to buckle-up"; "I wear a seatbelt to protect my pretty face"; "Seniors say, 'I buckle-up before I turn the key'"; "On any Friday night, the clear majority of ABC students are wearing a seatbelt"; "No seatbelt is soooooooo seventies"… The breadth of message content is only limited by your time and creativity. However, the best source for expanding the library of messages is the target audience themselves. Frequent feedback/market research asking the right questions can provide a rich diversity of credible messages.

Use flexible media. Explore and develop inexpensive easily produced media: one-color, photocopied posters, postcards, table tents, computer-generated banners, flyers, screen savers, etc. Because these media are cheap they can be used briefly and the content can change frequently. They are very flexible allowing the marketing campaign to make immediate changes in response to feedback from the audience and changing conditions.

Minimize the trinkets. Use T-shirts, key chains, pencils, cups, and other trinkets sparingly. Use trinkets as incentives or rewards for participating in a survey or some other interactive event. Do not use trinkets as a primary method or as a mass giveaway to saturate the population. Ask the target audience whether the trinket dignifies or cheapens/degrades the message.

Respect your audience. Most people, regardless of socio-economic status, age, or gender respond positively to fresh ideas, polite salutations and simple decency. Think of communicating with your audience as you would talk to a class of college students. They appreciate an intelligent comment, a pleasantry, a bit of humor and they get bored with the disingenuous greetings, sophomoric jokes, and mindless repetitive chatter. We do not want our marketing effort to be elevator music. By taking time to develop integrated and interesting campaigns, keeping it fresh and fun, and effectively using art and/or humor, we demonstrate that we care for and respect the people we reach.

Change designers. If one person designs most of the materials, posters, advertisements, etc., the audience may become habituated to the "look." It may be that the media has become gender specific, appealing to one gender but turning off the other or connects with one sub-group but irritates others. Whatever the case, adding or changing designers is another way to avoid habituation and keep the media fresh.

Conclusion

The social norms approach is elegant in its simplicity. And yet, the actual work of correcting misperceived social norms is a very difficult undertaking. On the one hand, it is essential to expose the community to true norm messages repeatedly and effectively whilst simultaneously avoiding audience habituation to the messages. It can be done. It has been done. Habituation is prevented and treated by conducting frequent monitoring through market research and regular audience feedback coupled with strategic corrections. As more practitioners understand and apply these principles, perceptions of social norms begin to become more accurate, behavior changes, and communities benefit.

Michael P. Haines, M.S is the founder and Director of the National Social Norms Resource Center. He can be reached at: mhaines@niu.edu.