Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

PTTC Prevention Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Communication Strategies to Reduce Underage Drinking

Media and other communications efforts can be used to help change or reinforce community norms concerning tolerance of alcohol sales to, and use by, minors. Policies must correspond with community beliefs about the harm of a particular substance or the "rightness" or "wrongness" of a particular action. For a community to accept, promote, and enforce a particular policy or regulation, there must be some understanding of the problem and a readiness to change based on that understanding.

For this reason, prevention practitioners frequently employ the local media and use public education strategies to influence community norms. Media can also increase public awareness of specific issues and problems related to underage drinking; attract community support for program efforts; reinforce individual-, family-, and community-level programs for young people and/or their parents; and keep the public informed about program progress.

Research suggests that these communication campaigns are more effective when they:

- **Are combined with more intensive and interactive prevention approaches.**
  When coupled with other, more intensive and interactive prevention approaches or with policy and enforcement activities, the media can be a useful tool for reaching many people in the surrounding community.[1]

- **Present messages that appeal to young people's motives for and perceptions of drinking alcohol.**
  Messages that appeal to or correct young people's perceptions of risk are more likely to be effective than messages that do not.[2] For example, counter-advertising campaigns that disseminate information about the hazards of a product or the industry that promotes it can help reduce alcohol sales and consumption.

- **Tailor messages to the audience.**
  "Young people" are not a homogeneous group—they vary by a range of characteristics, including (but not limited to) age, gender, ethnicity, education, social group, and experience. Knowledge of these traits can help prevention practitioners develop and deliver appropriate messages that resonate with the particular audience(s) they are trying to reach.[3]

- **Place messages where young people are likely to see and hear them.**
  It is strategic to pay for television and radio "spots" in choice airtimes when youth are more likely to view or listen.[4] Similarly, new media and social media provide other channels to reach youth with messages about underage drinking.
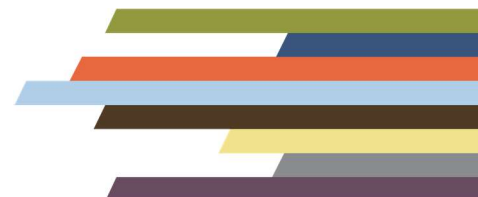
Great Lakes Prevention Technology Transfer Center

The following are examples of communication strategies. Click on the title of the strategy for more information.

- **Counter-advertising**
  Counter-advertising uses commercial marketing tactics, including branding of messages, images, and warning labels, to refute pro-substance influences and increase pro-health messages and influences. Counter-advertising is commonly used to balance the potential effects of alcohol advertising on consumption and alcohol-related problems.

- **Media Advocacy**
  Media advocacy is the strategic use of media (e.g., radio, newspapers, TV, op-eds, blogs, social network sites) to advance a prevention initiative. Media advocacy can be used to raise awareness of underage drinking, generate public debate about related issues, and garner support for prevention efforts.

- **Social Marketing**
  Social marketing uses techniques adapted from commercial marketing to encourage positive, voluntary behavior change. This strategy involves disseminating messages that reinforce the benefits of engaging in a specific behavior while minimizing the perceived negative consequences typically associated with behavior change.

- **Social Norms Campaign**
  Based on the assumption that inaccurate normative beliefs such as "everybody drinks" lead to problem drinking behaviors among underage youth, social norms campaigns use scientific evidence (e.g., consumption data) to promote accurate, healthy norms about alcohol use.

(This material is an excerpt from Prevention Solutions@EDC,
https://preventionsolutions.edc.org/services/resources/policy-strategies*)*

Great Lakes Prevention Technology Transfer Center

References

1 Gordon, R., McDermott, L., Stead, M., & Angus, K. (2006). The effectiveness of social marketing interventions for health improvement: What's the evidence? [Systematic review of the literature]. Public Health, 120(12), 1133–1139.

2 Slater, M. D. (1999a). A content analysis of behavioral influence strategies. Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 44(3), 68–81; and Slater, M. D. (1999b). Integrating application of media effects, persuasion and behavior change theories to communication campaigns: A states-of-change framework. Health Communication, 11(4), 335–354.

3 Grier, S., & Bryant, C. A. (2005). Social marketing in public health. Annual Review of Public Health, 26, 319–339; Lefebvre, R. C., & Flora, J. A. (1988). Social marketing and public health intervention. Health Education Quarterly, 15(3), 299–315; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). (2001). Community how to guide on…media relations. Retrieved from https://one.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/alcohol/Community%20Guides%20HTML/Book7_MediaRelations.html; and KU Work Group for Community Health and Development. (2014). Chapter 45, Section 2: Conducting a Social Marketing Campaign. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas. Retrieved from the Community Tool Box: http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/sustain/social-marketing/conduct-campaign/main.

4 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). (2001). Community how to guide on…media relations. Retrieved from https://one.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/alcohol/Community%20Guides%20HTML/Book7_MediaRelations.html; and KU Work Group for Community Health and Development. (2014). Chapter 45, Section 2: Conducting a Social Marketing Campaign. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas. Retrieved from the Community Tool Box: https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/sustain/social-marketing/conduct-campaign/main.