Internet-based Pretesting as an Alternative to Focus Groups and Face-to-Face Surveys

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DOH — STATE OF NEW YORK DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Background

- In December 2008 and January 2009, the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) conducted a statewide media campaign to promote STD and HIV testing. The campaign included print (billboards), radio and internet advertisements. The campaign was planned by members of an adolescent sexual health cross-program committee (the Planning Committee).

- Campaign materials primarily targeted adolescents and young adults (15-24 years of age) who were sexually active or contemplating sexual activity. Billboards were targeted to a more general audience, and were placed strategically to include the geographic areas of statewide, regional and local stakeholders.

- Short funding expenditure deadlines required a rapid implementation timeline, precluding pretesting of campaign materials through traditional focus group methods.

- Internet-based pretesting was used to obtain feedback on proposed visual images and campaign messages.

Methods

- The Planning Committee developed and refined five creative themes, guided by previous campaign materials and campaigns from other jurisdictions. Preliminary feedback from a local youth focus group and the HIV community planning group was incorporated.

- Each of the four creative themes included variations to be pre-tested, including color palettes, image size and image focal point.

- Staff developed a 28 question survey, using Likert-scale, multiple choice and open-ended response questions. The survey included:
  - Specific questions for each of the five creative themes;
  - Preference questions to compare all of the creative themes;
  - Open-ended questions to solicit feedback for future campaigns; and
  - Demographic questions.

- The survey was finalized and transferred to Surveymonkey.com, a web-based survey collection tool.

- An e-mail, with survey instructions and the survey URL was distributed to youth-serving contractors of NYSDOH, asking them to encourage their youth participants to take part in the pretesting. Colleges and universities with representation on the NYS College Health Association's Health Promotion Committee were also approached (six participated).

- Surveys were collected for three weeks (September 24, 2008 – October 15, 2008). Two different URLs were used to differentiate between adolescent program contractor-solicited responses and college-solicited responses.

- Survey responses were instantly available and downloadable (Microsoft Excel) with multiple options for level of detail, facilitating quick analysis without need for data entry.

Sample Screenshots from the Survey

Figure 1 –Color Palette Pretesting

Figure 2 – Comparison Pretesting

Results

- Pretesting through Surveymonkey.com elicited 58 responses over three weeks (57% through adolescent contractors; 43% through colleges).

- Forty three respondents (74%) completed the entire survey. All respondents provided at least some feedback beyond demographics.

- Specific elements of creative themes were preferred, based on survey results
  - Slogans – "1 in 2 of us will get an STD by age 25" was preferred over "Half of us…"
  - Color schemes – yellow text and banners were preferred over green; muted colors over bold colors.
  - Image size preference – users preferred square ads significantly more than ribbon or pillar-shaped ads; emphasis on square ad placement was requested of the media buyer.

- Participants selected the ads which would be more effective at catching someone's eye, as well as which ones they most related to.
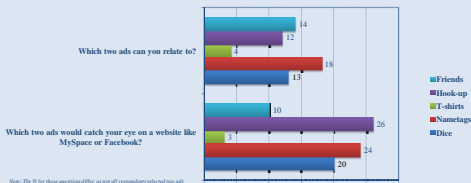

Which two ads can you relate to?

Which two ads would catch your eye on a website like MySpace or Facebook?

Note: The N for these questions differ, as not all respondents selected two ads

Figure 3 – Comparison Pretesting Results

Results (continued)

- Three of the four youth-based themes tested well; the fourth theme was not aired due to poor pretesting. A fifth theme, the dice ad, was used for the billboards targeting a larger audience.
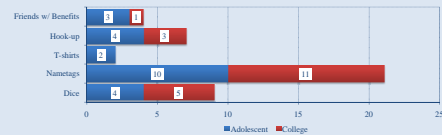

Figure 4 – Overall Image Preference

- Participant responses to the image comparison questions, supported by specific comments describing why an image was favored, were assessed. Modifications to specific images were made based on the pretesting.

- Additional information requested in the pretesting was analyzed and has provided guidance for development of an additional media campaign focusing on general adolescent and young adult sexual health.

- Participants provided recommendations on what types of images or scenes would be effective at getting the target audiences' attention.
  - *Not posed pictures. If they are going to be posed, make them look real. stock imagery not the best idea, they aren't "real" people.* (adolescent)
  - *Things to do with partying, fashion will allow teens to open there [sic] eyes to such a serious note.* (adolescent)
  - *Party scenes and strange images you don't often see.* (college)

- Participants also suggested messages or topics of interest related to sexual/reproductive health.
  - *Looking at some of the perceptions - they might be surprised that they are not in the minority with not having sex.* (adolescent)
  - *Reminding them that babies cry… a lot! And how they would feel if they got an STD or HIV.* (adolescent)
  - *Showing statistical data on STD/HIV and teen pregnancy and [sic] would be an effective way to show the risk factors.* (college)

Discussion

Internet survey can provide representative feedback quickly:
- New York State is geographically, racially, ethnically and culturally diverse, so it was important to obtain feedback from multiple audiences. The organizations on the survey distribution list serve adolescents and young adults from across the state and of all backgrounds, including sexual orientation. Additionally, the six college/university participants were located in counties considered predominantly rural (e.g., Oswego County – SUNY Oswego) and urban (e.g., Monroe County – Nazareth College).

Discussion (continued)

- Re-canvassing to obtain additional feedback or to fill "gaps" in representation is also easy. Survey URLs can be re-sent to partners, deadlines can be expanded, and URLs can be sent to partners that serve underrepresented populations. In contrast, focus groups provide a specific population that the planner has minimal control over at the time of the event – whoever shows up is the participant audience, without reconvening additional focus groups.

Internet surveys provide a significantly low cost opportunity to pretest materials:
- Cost was a significant barrier to standard pretesting. This media campaign was planned at a time of state restrictions limiting travel and contract initiation.

- The Department used an existing Surveymonkey.com account (annual professional cost $200). Alternately, conducting representative focus groups to obtain 43 complete responses would likely take 4-6 groups of optimal size, including costs for travel, accommodations, facility rental and participant incentives.

- Internet-based pretesting reduced needed staff time. Survey development, transfer to Surveymonkey.com and distribution to contractors took 10-15 staff hours. Data entry was provided via the survey. Data analysis took an additional 5-10 hours, primarily to analyze open-ended responses. In comparison, focus groups would require significantly more time for planning and conducting each focus group, data entry and analysis.

Limitations:
- Group dynamics and facilitated discussion are not available, potentially reducing the depth of information gathered.

- The online format does not allow for further clarification. Ambiguous or contradictory responses must be taken at face value. Additionally, unless contact information is provided by participants, follow-up for further discussion is not possible.

- Finally, the technology used has limitations, particularly with movie and audio files. We initially wanted to pretest radio spots as part of the online survey. Since these file types are externally hosted and hot-linked to the survey, options for online pretesting are limited (without using more sophisticated survey services).

Postscript: How Did the Pretested Campaign Images Fare?

The internet portion of the media campaign occurred during December 2008, and consisted of 43,867,605 total impressions. Of this, 20,212 users clicked on the advertisement to access the call to action website (www.hivtest.org), representing a click through rate (CTR) of 0.05; site-specific CTRs ranged from 0.02 to 0.29. Image-specific CTRs were unavailable; however, the media buyer monitored which images were receiving more clicks and was able to adjust the proportion of the images or an image's shape on a particular website. It is unknown whether the campaign had additional effects, i.e., whether people might choose to type in the website URL instead of clicking the links.

Acknowledgements