Performance Vistas, Inc.
Social Norming Project Experience

Background

The social norms approach is one of the fastest growing scientifically validated methodologies for addressing health problems and risk behaviors. It has been successfully applied to reduce alcohol use and abuse and smoking on college and university campuses. In high schools nationwide, social norms has been the subject of numerous awards and Federal Grants, and is currently being tested for its efficacy in violence prevention and other areas. Social norms interventions have also been developed to address sexual assault and violence prevention, and research in these areas has confirmed the theory, with some interventions reporting reductions in attitudes associated with violence and sexual assault.

Social norms theory assumes that much of our behavior is influenced by how other members of our social groups behave, and that our beliefs about what others do are often incorrect. The model was first proposed by Alan Berkowitz and H. Wesley Perkins based on research conducted at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Social norms theory predicts that individuals overestimate the degree to which peers have permissive attitudes or behavior with respect to alcohol and other drugs or other health problems, and underestimate the extent to which peers engage in healthy, health-promoting behavior and risk-reducing behavior. (This approach has also been called proactive prevention, norm misperception theory, and social norming). These predictions have been confirmed in a number of studies.

The concept of misperceptions used for prevention was introduced almost ten years ago by Perkins and Berkowitz (1996). Norming research has found that college students consistently overestimate the number of their peers who drink heavily and their acceptance of the drunken behavior. The acceptance of the misperception of the normative behavior of college students has a strong influence on students. Basically, if students believe most students drink, students will tend to drink more.

Social norms prevention projects are based on a model of identifying and reinforcing existing protective norms concerning alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, violence, traffic safety and literacy issues; and correcting misinterpretations about community behaviors and norms. The main method for using this approach is "social marketing," primarily through media and other appropriate channels. Most of the expected outcomes focus on increasing prosocial, health positive behaviors, along with increasing more accurate perceptions of community norms.

Social norms campaigns require careful documentation of actual and perceived patterns of drinking, education of campus or community leaders and "stakeholders," and development of educational media that have audience appeal. Although intuitively simple, the approach requires careful planning and implementation for it to be successful.

Social Norming Strategies
1. Administer and analyze the results of a specially designed survey. (Maintain stability in the survey for comparing data over multiple administrations of the survey.) For example, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.
2. Develop, market test, and publish advertisements containing positive images of the target population engaging in popular/healthy activities. They should be photographed in recognizable community locations; they should contain accurate status of community norms; and they should clearly state the source of the data. Use feedback from focus groups to evolve appropriate slogans, e.g., "Most (84%) Western students drink 0-4 drinks when they party."
3. Develop, market test, and implement neighborhood "door-knocker" campaign, utilizing creatively-designed social-norms marketing materials to inform the target population and community residents in neighborhoods about the actual behavior norms.
4. Develop, market test, and distribute to key community stakeholders a specially designed research paper on the relationship between the actual behavior norms and other desirable community characteristics (e.g., the relationship between campus dinking behavior and grade point average).

Involvement of Performance Vistas Principals in Social Norming Projects
Early Entry into Prenatal Care: Using social norming and social marketing techniques, Dick Grimm worked with 27 community coalitions to increase the initiation of prenatal care during the first trimester of pregnancy for Medicaid-eligible pregnant women in Florida. These coalitions conducted data research on the status of first-trimester entry into prenatal care by county and neighborhoods, conducted focus groups with women who entered prenatal care during the first trimester of pregnancy to determine the reasons for this behavior, and constructed media campaigns and messages to target high-risk pregnant women. (1988-94)

Aggression Replacement Training: The social norms model has become popular through campus-wide interventions using posters and/or electronic media. Less well-known are social norms interventions developed for small groups such as Greeks, athletes, and first-year students, which present group members with actual and perceived norms for their group and/or campus in an interactive format that fosters discussion and analysis of why false norms exist. These programs have been shown to be successful with a variety of audiences and are easy to develop and implement. Ashley Grimm and Dick Grimm utilized social norming concepts for small groups to treat a group of thirty-nine delinquent boys and girls enrolled in a special court program in Escambia County,

Florida, each of whom were severely deficient in anger management control. In this project, Grimm and Grimm exposed the youth to a series of moral dilemmas in a discussion-group context, including youths with differing levels of moral reasoning ability, arousing an experience of cognitive conflict whose resolution advanced the youth's moral reasoning to that of the higher level peers in the group.

Teen Pregnancy Prevention: Dick Grimm facilitated a series of regional planning meetings to develop teen pregnancy prevention programs throughout South Carolina. Specifically, community planners and teen pregnancy program directors were invited to develop programs that targeted teen sexual risk-taking behavior, using a social norming approach. As with alcohol and drug use and abuse, teen sexual behavior is also driven largely by misperceptions about what their peers and their parents think, and their misperceptions of the sexual risk-taking behaviors of their peers. Social norming was a primary focus of the successful grants. (2001-02)

Safe Sleeping: In Escambia County, Florida, almost 20% of infant deaths in 2001 were caused by positional asphyxiation due to unsafe sleeping practices. Dick Grimm facilitated a community planning process to address this problem. A community needs assessment was conducted, with a number of survey items addressing knowledge and behaviors regarding safe sleeping practices for infants. The results of this community needs assessment were used to develop safe sleeping messages (posters, tri-folds, newspaper articles, etc.) focusing on low-income pregnant women and new mothers. (2002-03)

Physician Office Practices: The social norming construct is currently being used by Dick Grimm to enhance the prenatal risk screening practices of physicians providing prenatal care in Escambia County, Florida. The goal in Florida is for all pregnant women to be screened for health and behavior risks for poor pregnancy outcomes. Discussions with physicians and their office managers with poor screening rates indicate that they misperceive the extent to which their peers conduct screening. A series of interventions using asocial norming and social marketing approach is being developed to increase screening rates among low performing offices. (2003)

Lessons Learned
1. It is very important to pilot all projects before finalizing them. After conducting some focus groups and looking at data from the first six months of a project, it is often necessary to change the message. What we think might be a believable message may not prove to be so. Developing a project with a "logic model" design is important. Using that logic model's measures of success to manage a social norming project is even more important.
2. People are inherently poster-blind and do not notice posters unless they are creative and unique. As a result, it is necessary to put a lot of time and energy into the creative aspect of social marketing.

3. Focus groups are not only useful in understanding the appropriate message to be conveyed, they can also be helpful in determining the best medium and the best location to place social marketing messages. To get messages across effectively and efficiently, a project should use a social marketing approach that uses commercial advertising techniques to create or change a specific behavior within a target audience.

4. Incorporating pertinent social norming messages into an organization's on-going prevention efforts will take the message beyond marketing. Helping people who question the statistics to have the opportunity to discuss the issue, and to learn why the messages are true are important elements of a comprehensive prevention effort. Incorporating social norming messages into major outreach efforts also helps to increase the exposure of the messages. Having a consistent message in one's outreach and community education efforts is a must. The key to the social norms approach is for the entire community to transmit consistent, accurate messages.