Habituation and Social Norms

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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 counter productive 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 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 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 market place. 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.

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 are 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 "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" inverviews.)* 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 the 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. One 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 principals perceptions of social norms begin to become more accurate, behavior changes, and communities benefit.

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