

The Fifth Annual National Social Norms Conference: An Overview

Over 300 individuals attended the Fifth Annual National Conference on the Social Norms Model, held July 10-12, 2002 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This year's conference benefited from the financial support of the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board and the Anheuser-Busch Companies, Inc.

There were approximately thirty sessions devoted to a wide range of issues, including:

- *Using Social Norms in Peer Theater*
Described a successful project at the State University of New York at Albany that integrates social norms information and data into the performances of the *Middle Earth Players*, a peer theater program. This intervention has demonstrated success in correcting the misperceptions regarding alcohol use at the university, solidifying the presence of protective behaviors, and reducing rates of alcohol use on campus.
- *The What, Why, and How of Rigorous Focus Group Methodology*
This presentation concentrated on methods of transforming qualitative research theory on focus groups into hands-on applications that participants could use in the development of their social norms marketing projects.
- *Data Collection and Analysis*
A number of sessions were devoted to various issues surrounding data collection and analysis. Topics addressed included: the relative merits of various survey instruments; problems in the collection and analysis of data based on consistent measures; data collection tools and techniques of use in community settings, on college campuses, and in national assessments; and market testing techniques for social norms media development.
- *Social Norms and High-Risk Drinkers*
Several sessions were devoted to using social norms to target various high-risk populations, such as athletes, fraternity and sorority members, and heavy, frequent drinkers. Intervention methods discussed included: personalized feedback profiles; the small groups norms-challenging model; and specifically targeted print, electronic, and peer educator strategies.
- *Special Topic Panels*
New to this year's conference was the addition of special topic panels, where a number of researchers and practitioners addressed topics such as funding issues, media relations, the application of social norms to social justice issues, and the special challenges and opportunities of using social norms in community settings.

Given the breadth of conference offerings, it is perhaps best in this brief report to highlight some of the key information presented there.

Measurement and Message

In the plenary session, Dr. H. Wesley Perkins addressed the complex interrelationship of social norms measurement and message. His remarks, largely cautionary, focused on several current concerns in the field:

- *Single Measure Mindlessness*
Singular attention to any one measure can cause one to neglect other important data. One example of this is the 5 or more drinks at an occasion question. Often inappropriately used as a single cut-off measure, it is notably insensitive to any reduced consumption achieved among the heaviest drinkers. By contrast, use of a continuous variable will yield a more comprehensive analysis of project impact.
- *Single Message Mantra*
Single message campaigns swiftly go stale and are branded by the target population. By contrast, campaigns with a variety of messages stay fresh and provide a fuller picture of the accurate norms.
- *Injunctive Norm Neglect*
In our work we often focus on descriptive or behavioral norms, neglecting the injunctive or attitudinal norms of a population. We need to be aware that the injunctive norms, which are also frequently misperceived, can provide rich and positive data for our campaigns.

These comments significantly augment the points that Dr. Perkins made during his pre-conference workshop, where he noted that evidence has begun to accumulate that the most effective social norm campaigns share the following characteristics:

- There is a clear, positive norm underlying the campaign. Nevertheless, successful campaigns often provide a variety of messages that give a fuller picture of the actual norms.
- Competing, scare tactic messages are absent.
- Message dosage is high, ongoing and intense, and both message recall and acceptance by the target audience are frequently evaluated.
- Synergistic strategies are used so that normative messages are delivered in various contexts.
- Normative messages are delivered to the general population, not just targeted sub-groups. This counters both the personal and the contextual misperception effects.

Social Norms and Tobacco

Among the key findings presented at the conference include the successful use of social norms to reduce cigarette use. Two projects in particular have built on the work of the DCP/SAFE Social Norms Project that has achieved significant reductions in cigarette use among students in two Midwestern high schools. The first, the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh's *You Know You Want To...* campaign, has thus far achieved a 33% reduction in smoking rates among students. One of the innovative elements of this campaign is

reflected in its primary normative message: "96% of UW Oshkosh students who smoke want to quit before graduating." Most tobacco-related social norm campaigns focus on the fact that smoking is not the norm (E.g., "7 out of 10 students don't smoke..."), a strategy that may inadvertently antagonize the target population of smokers by further ostracizing them. By contrast, the UW Oshkosh approach suggests a way to positively connect with smokers and then augment the primary message with additional normative information, some injunctive, some descriptive.

The second successful campaign reported on, the Montana *Most of Us Are Tobacco Free* social norm project, targeted youth between the ages of 12 and 17 in seven western Montana counties. In this community-based intervention, post-test data revealed that only 10% of the teens in the campaign area reported first time cigarette use as compared to 17% of the teens in a control sample from the rest of the state. (Post-test interviews were conducted with 641 of the original 848 teens in the intervention and control samples.) This represents a 41% difference in the proportion of teens that reported initiation of smoking in the intervention counties as compared with those in the rest of the state.

Protection Trumps Risk

Finally, important research was presented that focused on the strategies that college students employ to minimize their risk for alcohol-related harm when drinking. Previous work has identified a cluster of what might be called Personal Protective Drinking Behaviors that, when used regularly by college students, reduced the likelihood of harm. Research has also shown that, as the number of different protective behaviors employed by students increases, the probability of alcohol-related harm decreases. This relationship exists for moderate drinkers as well as less moderate drinkers. The protective behaviors identified are:

- Determine, in advance, not to exceed a set number of drinks.
- Choose not to drink alcohol.
- Keep track of how many drinks you are having.
- Pace yourself to one or fewer drinks per hour.
- Avoid drinking games.

Statistical analysis of the aggregate National College Health Assessment data revealed that the incidence of alcohol-related harm drops nearly to zero for those students who practice a cluster of four or more of these protective behaviors. Most importantly, this is true whether the students BAC level is above or below .10. This has obvious implications for the field, since it strongly suggests that protection trumps risk. Traditional prevention approaches that focus solely on abstinence or attempts to minimize the behavior have generally failed; this work suggests that a more effective method of risk reduction would be to identify and promote a target population's indigenous protective behaviors.

(A version of this article appeared in the December 2002 issue of The Report on Social Norms, Vol. 2:2.)