

CAN LOCAL DRUG PREVENTION 'SIZZLE'?

The lessons of an innovative local drug prevention campaign.

A drug prevention campaign in Brighton used local radio ads, a phonecard and other materials circulated through youth clubs to stimulate calls to an answering machine with a message on drugs. The materials evoked generally positive responses among the minority of young people who became aware of them. While local interest was generated, a lack of tie-in between elements of the campaign limited youth involvement.

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FACTLINE '89 was a drug prevention campaign designed and delivered at a local level by DAIS, the Drug Advice and Information Service in Brighton. Brighton is in South East Thames Regional Health Authority, one of three approached by the Department of Health late in 1988. The department's proposal was that each RHA nominate local agencies to implement local action linking drug prevention and education services by 1 April 1989.

DAIS constructed a strategy for a campaign with three main elements:

- two local radio commercials aimed at young people;
- a set of materials disseminated through the youth service and through colleges attended by 16-19 year olds; and
- a 'harm minimisation' phone message (the 'FACTLINE') advertised by the radio ads and the youth service materials.

Lasting one month, the campaign was initiated on 6 March 1989 by a publicity launch with press pack and by newspaper advertising, and cost just under £10,000.

DAIS adopts a broadly harm-minimisation approach to its work with clients. It also adopts a similar approach to prevention, arguing that overt anti-drug/anti-drink preaching is unlikely to be effective and may alienate young people; the important thing is to act as a credible source of information and to point out the particular dangers young people may not be aware of, such as drug/alcohol interactions. Asked to consider mounting a prevention campaign, the agency sought to marry the concerns and resources of central government to their own harm-minimisation aims.

The agency did not change its view that it was 16-25 year-olds - particularly those more independent and excitement-seeking - who are especially in need of good information, and that messages for this group have to be presented in ways they will find accessible and acceptable. Local radio commercials were seen as a suitable medium, and one relatively quick to set up.

One thing that *did* differ from the agency's previous campaigns was the tight

time-frame imposed by the need for government departments to spend monies before the end of the financial year. With just nine weeks to complete the task, embellishing existing practice, rather than complete innovation, was the only practical course - one reason why the campaign included two elements from DAIS's 1988 campaign.¹

In the youth services pack was a really creative innovation - a phonecard allowing free calls to the factline. Supplied free by British Telecom, the card came in a plastic wallet with information about the factline. Also included were a small poster, coasters, a briefing for the worker outlining the campaign, 'reminder cards', and a set of 'Golden Rules' designed to promote discussion with young people.

The radio commercials were produced by a local advertising agency working to DAIS's brief. Printed materials were also locally designed and printed. The answer-phone message was scripted by DAIS and the advertising agency, which arranged its professional recording.

A training/explanation/induction meeting for youth workers was planned, but proved impossible because the education department's planning schedules - worked out several months in advance - were not sufficiently flexible. This was to have implications for youth workers' and young people's understanding of and involvement in the campaign.

The impact

The impact of the radio commercials was assessed by a survey of 552 young people five weeks after the end of the campaign.² Asked about the FACTLINE '89 commercials, one in ten said that they were aware of them, and three-quarters of these thought - as intended by DAIS - they had been aimed at young people in general and at *potential* drug users. Two-thirds of those who remembered them felt approval or happiness over the ads, and a quarter sadness or frustration.

The story of how the youth work materials were received by young people is

Campaign themes

DAIS's campaign themes were:

- Dangers of mixing alcohol and other drugs.
- Specific dangers around solvent use.
- Hazards of taking unknown pills.
- The dangers of unprotected sexual intercourse.

told second-hand by workers either interviewed, involved in group discussions, or surveyed by post. Most of the 600 packs went to youth clubs and the rest to colleges.

In the more informal youth club setting, the poster was pinned on a wall, the coasters put to fairly immediate use and played with in various ways, the phonecard passed round and admired but not used in the club (most lack a phonecard payphone).

A postal survey of 28 youth workers confirmed that these materials were responded to positively, but most (17) reported that young people generally responded only briefly, and in nine cases there was apparently no discussion at all.

Youth workers received a briefing outlining the four themes of the campaign as well as the other materials. But, since most neither heard the radio ads nor rang the factline, they were not very well placed to facilitate follow-up activities or discuss campaign themes with young people.

What seems to have been missing is any clear follow-up structure for capitalising on the novelty value of the materials to get discussion going around the campaign themes. A similar problem seems to have occurred in the colleges. Here, the typed factsheets were potentially more relevant, but were too long and complex for many students. The coasters, described as beer-mats, generated some bewilderment in the context of classrooms, but some found their way into refectories and became objects of comment. The poster was quite liked, but you could not 'do' anything with it.

The phonecard was "an absolute bonus", generating much interest, but there was a need for some *intermediate* activity between 'looking' at the card and 'phoning' the number in order to keep up the momentum.

The factline call-logger recorded a rapid escalation of calls from the day after the launch, touching 60 a day in the first week and then falling back to between 10 and 60 per day over the next four weeks. Although the last commercial was broadcast on 27 March, calls continued well into April, due to a mixture of continuing news coverage, local newspaper advertising and comment,

FACTLINE '90

The FACTLINE '90 campaign due to be launched on 3 September will draw on the experience of last year and the recommendations of the evaluation report. Because of the much longer planning time, there will be opportunity for workshop sessions for youth workers and college staff to preview all the materials. Follow-up packs will be far simpler and more activity-based and cassettes of the two radio ads will be distributed to all youth centres organising discos, so that the campaign's messages can be programmed into their music output.

DAIS is also negotiating for the secondment of a part-time detached worker to develop contacts with young people in clubs and pubs in Brighton.

Now that plans have been unveiled for the new Home Office local Drug Prevention Teams, ostensibly "fully responsive to local needs and perceptions", it will be very interesting to see how locally-developed projects (especially those built on harm-reduction strategies like FACTLINE in Brighton) will fare alongside the teams' programmes of work.

and continuing circulation of the phonecard and other materials. By the end of April, over 600 calls had been received, cumulating to over 800 over the next month.

Doing it better

The FACTLINE '89 campaign was a success in terms of the design of its parts and was quite well integrated in terms of multi-agency coordination at the tops of the hierarchies of participating agencies.

DAIS was able to tie together central government, health authority, education authority and local media around a concept of prevention of harm among young potential drug users. This is a considerable achievement – a small agency writing the agenda for wider cooperation. Government got good value for money, since DAIS's strategy of getting free publicity by encouraging local press and radio to report the campaign as *news* worked well.

But lack of time and, possibly, lack of a clear strategy for helping bridge the gap between awareness and action, limited the campaign's potential for professions 'at the coalface' and for young people.

Take-up in educational systems (youth work and colleges) was relatively poor. Lack of training/induction for youth workers and college tutors, and the compressed time scale, are the most obvious causes. Two other factors can be identified: unnecessary complexity in the materials, with too

much printed matter for most young people (and for busy practitioners); and insufficient thought about how they might be used in the contexts in which they were to be delivered to young people.

These factors left too many young people intrigued but bemused, when simple participative approaches might have generated greater enthusiasm and more action. Four campaign themes and as many presentational devices are simply too much.

We suggest two areas where future campaigns may be improved. As far as informal and formal educational settings are concerned, future materials should be less diverse, more participative, and help to construct an interest-involvement-action chain. Examples might include:

- posters that *illustrate* groups of young people using the phonecard;
- games and jigsaws that convey a message and also give *specific prompts* to calling the factline;
- coasters that have printed on them very simple mini-questionnaires asking what aspects of the recorded message were fantastic/boring/stupid, providing a basis for *post-call discussion*; and
- very simple 'what to do' sheets for youth workers and tutors.

It may also be useful to take up the point that few people over 14 frequent youth clubs. Outreach work was suggested as a means of contacting older, more drink/drugs-prone young people. However, new workers are unlikely to be able to become effective within the time-span of a short campaign.

The question remains of how to tie together radio commercials with distribution of other materials – coasters, possibly comics, phonecards, etc. One way would be to link the materials to concessions such as reduced price or free entry to entertainment venues. This could be advertised by radio, giving the number of an answerphone capable of giving a short message and then recording the caller's name and address to which tickets and campaign material could be sent.

Even in short campaigns, adequate planning time is desirable so that the local agency has the chance to build up the forward momentum needed to handle a demanding campaign without unnecessary strain, and so that campaign strategies can be translated into an integrated set of actions.

For this to happen, campaign sponsors would need to give more notice than was possible in this case. Since the political and funding dynamics of central government seem unlikely to allow this, local health and education authorities should develop outline proposals. These would suffice to support the planning, design and delivery of skeletal campaigns, which could opportunistically be expanded by short-term injection of cash from central government and/or private sources. ■

1. Fraser A. et al. *Drug Questions research register*. 1988, 4 p.133-9.

2. The survey was drawn up in a very short period of time by the advertising agency and can only give a rough idea of the response of the target group.