

When Social Norms Interventions Are Unsuccessful

As interventions based on the social norms model become more prevalent, there are more examples of unsuccessful interventions. This is natural as the field evolves and grows and is especially likely in light of the many ways in which the implementation and evaluation process can be flawed.

Berkowitz (2003c), Haines (1996), Johannessen (1999), and Linkenbach (2003) provide a detailed overview of the phases of implementing a social norms media campaign, which Fabiano (1999) has condensed into six stages:

- assessment (collection of data),
- selection of the normative message
- testing the message with the target group
- selecting the normative delivery strategy
- dosage of the message
- evaluation of the effectiveness of the message.

Mistakes can occur at any of these stages. For example, participants are likely to question initially the validity of survey data because of misperceptions they hold, but will rethink their assumptions if the data are reliable and presented in an open manner. In contrast, unreliable or confusing survey data may be rejected and in the end undermine the campaign and reinforce misperceptions. In addition, media that are confusing or unappealing, presented by unreliable sources, or not presented in sufficient doses will not have an impact. Key stakeholders can also undermine campaigns through negative comments and criticisms or by sharing their own misperceptions. The following examples illustrate some of these reasons for campaign failure.

Werch et al (2000) outlined an unsuccessful campaign in which social norms messages were sent through the mail to a small sample of freshmen. Three “greeting cards” with normative data were sent in the fall term and a follow-up phone call was conducted in the spring term. This campaign may have failed because the campaign was conducted only over a one-month period, which may not have been long enough, the messages were not focus group tested with students in advance so they may not have been persuasive, and the target subjects were exposed to campus-wide misperceptions that may have undermined the campaign’s messages.

Clapp, Russell and DeJong (2001) reported on a failed social norms media campaign in which students did not understand the message, the

message and image were incongruent, and the image overpowered the message. In this campaign the image (a student throwing up) was inconsistent with the normative data provided, and students were more likely to remember the image than the data.

Granfield (2002) provided a case study of a well-designed social norms media campaign that did not achieve expected outcomes because the message source was not believable to students. The campaign took place on a campus with a strong fraternity presence at a time when fraternities felt that they were under attack by the administration. Due to this feeling, students rejected the social norms messages because the campaign was felt to be part of an administration-led effort to undermine fraternities.

These findings suggest that when social norms campaigns are unsuccessful it is important to assess what went wrong and why, rather than to assume that the approach itself is flawed.

Unsuccessful interventions and philosophical/theoretical disagreements have led some to question the overall validity and effectiveness of social norms. Thus, critics have raised concerns about unsuccessful interventions, provided theoretical disagreements about the assumptions of the social norms approach, questioned the compatibility of norms correction campaigns with the underlying mission of higher education, and debated definitions of high-risk drinking. Berkowitz (2002) has provided an extensive response to each of these concerns, suggesting that some may be based on misunderstandings and overgeneralizations about the implications of failed interventions, while others reflect important theoretical and methodological issues that need to be addressed as part of the evolution of the model. In the same article, Rice (2002) reviewed common questions and concerns based on methodological issues.