Internet-based Pretesting as an Alternative to Focus Groups and Face-to-Face Surveys

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Background

- In December 2008 and January 2009, the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) conducted a statewide media campaign to promote HIV and STD testing. The campaign included radio spots, TV commercials, and print ads. The campaign's objective was to increase awareness of an adolescent sexual health cross-program committee (the Planning Committee).
- Campaign materials primarily targeted adolescents and young adults (15-24 years of age), who were sexually active or contemplating sexual activity. Billboards were targeted to a non-local general audience, while radio spots were targeted to a specific geographic area. The Planning Committee was specifically designed to include geographic areas of state restrictions limiting travel and adolescent local stakeholders.
- Short-funding expenditure deadlines required a rapid implementation timeline, precipitating pretesting of campaign materials through traditional focus group methods.
- Internet-based pretesting was used to obtain feedback on proposed visual images and campaign messages.

Methods

- The Planning Committee developed and refined the creative themes, guided by previous campaign materials and congruence with other promotions. Pretesting feedback from a local youth focus group and the NYSDOH community planning group was incorporated.
- Each of the four creative themes included variations to be pre-tested, including color palettes, image size, and image focal point.
- Staff developed a 28 question survey, using Likert-scale, multiple choice and open-ended question responses. The survey included:
  - Specific questions for each of the five creative themes;
  - Preference questions to compare all of the creative themes;
  - Open-ended questions to solicit feedback for future campaigns; and
  - Demographic questions.

The survey was finalized and transferred to SurveyMonkey.com, a web-based survey collection tool.

As an e-mail, with survey instructions and the survey URL was distributed to youth-serving contractors of NYSDOH, asking them to encourage their youth participants to take part in the pretesting. Colleges and universities with representation on the NYS College Health Association’s Health Promotion Committee were also approached (six participated).

Surveys were collected for three weeks (September 24, 2008 – October 15, 2008). Two different URLs were used to distinguish between adolescent program contractor-selected responses and college-solicited responses.

Surveys responses were instantly available and downloadable (Microsoft Excel) with multiple options for level of detail, facilitating quick analysis without need for data entry.

Background

- Participants provided recommendations on what types of images or scenes would be effective at getting the target audiences’ attention.
  - Reminding them that babies cry... a lot! And how they would feel if they got an STD or HIV.
  - Party scene and strange images you don’t often see.
  - Open-ended questions to solicit feedback for future campaigns; and
  - Participant incentives.

- Participants also suggested messages or topics of interest related to sexual/reproductive health.
  - Reminding them of the consequences... they might be surprised that they are not in the minority with our hearing aids (adolescent).
  - Shocking statistical data on HIV and teen pregnancy (adolescent)

Discussion

- The internet portion of the media campaign occurred during December 2008, and consisted of 43,867,605 total impressions. Of these, 20,212 users clicked on the advertisement to access the call to action website (www.hivtest.org), representing a click through rate (CTR) of 0.05; site-specific traffic from New York State was not tracked.
- The cost savings made possible through internet pretesting resulted in a cost savings of $2,000 and significantly more time for planning and conducting each focus group, data entry, and analysis.

- Limitations:
  - Group dynamics and facilitated discussion are not available, potentially reducing the depth of information gathered.
  - The online format does not allow for further clarification. Ambiguous or contradictory responses must be taken at face value. Additionally, unless contact information is provided by participants, follow-up for further discussions is not possible.
  - Finally, the technology used has limitations, particularly with mouse and audio files. We initially wanted to pretest radio spots as part of the online survey. Unless these file types are externally provided via the survey. Data analysis took an additional 5-10 hours, primarily to analyze open-ended responses. In comparison, focus groups would require significantly more time for planning and conducting each focus group, data entry and analysis.

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Results (continued)

- Pretesting through SurveyMonkey elicited 58 responses over three weeks (57% through adolescent contractors; 43% through colleges).
- Forty three respondents (74%) completed the entire survey. All respondents provided at least some feedback beyond demographics.
- Specific elements of creative themes were preferred, based on survey results:
  - Slapstick – 11 of 29 youth judged it to be age-appropriate, whereas 47% of adults considered it to be age-appropriate.
  - Image size preference – users preferred square ad placement is significantly more than ribbon or pill-shaped ads. Emphasis on square ad placement was requested of the media buyer.
  - Participants selected the ads which would be more effective at catching someone’s eye, as well as which ones they most related to.

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- Internet survey can provide representative feedback quickly:
  - New York State is geographically, racially, ethnically and culturally diverse, so it was important to obtain feedback from these audiences. The organizers on the survey distribution to serve adolescents and young adults from across the state of all backgrounds, including sexual orientation. Additionally, the six collaborative communities were located in counties considered predominantly rural (e.g., Oswego County – SUNY Oswego) and urban (e.g., Monroe County – Rochester College).

Limitations:

- The Department used an existing SurveyMonkey.com account (annual professional cost $200). Alternatively, conducting representative focus groups to obtain 43 complete responses would likely take 4-6 groups of optimal size, including costs for travel, accommodations, facility rental and participant incentives.

Postscript: How Did the Pretested Campaign Images Fare?

The pretesting portion of this media campaign (conducted December 2008), featured a total of 43,867,605 impressions. Of these, 20,212 users clicked on the advertisement to access the call to action website (www.hivtest.org), representing a click through rate (CTR) of 0.05. CTI’s ranged from 0.01 to 0.31. Traffic-specific CTI’s were unavailable, however, the media buyers measured response by viewing media time and was able to add the proportion of the image size or image shape in a particular website. It is unknown whether the campaign had additional effects, e.g., whether people might choose to type in the website URL, instead of clicking the link.