

Tips for Marketing to and Communicating With Urban Teens

This factsheet offers five basic tips for prevention practitioners with limited experience in working with urban teens. These tips are based on conversations with communication professionals, commercial marketers, public health specialists, and a review of recent literature.

1 **Keep it real**

Urban teens recognize hype and exaggeration and quickly tune out those types of messages and images. They believe that they are independent thinkers who can reach their own conclusions when presented with the facts. Be direct and honest and respect the values of your audience. Messages that provide the facts without pressuring youth to subscribe to your concept and images that realistically portray youth drug use are more likely to be received. For example, commercial marketers report that advertisements that present and market a certain image without explicitly stating the desirability or undesirability of that image are likely to have more impact than messages that are too obvious.

2 **Make it relevant**

Understand where urban youth are. In other words, get an understanding of the realities that urban teens experience, their world view, and issues of concern to them. If some of the issues they are currently facing include peer acceptance and limited educational and economic opportunities, those issues must be considered in your message development process. For instance, many urban teens are very conscious about money – how they can obtain it and what they can buy with it. If your audience shares this same economic consciousness, show them how drug use can interfere with their pursuit of money. Make the point that drug use can impair a person's ability to obtain and maintain a job.

Additionally, teens are concerned with the here and now. So develop messages that address their current reality and the immediate effects of using alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs. Telling a 14-year old that marijuana use impairs driving skills and may cause him or her to crash a car is a message that is likely to be ignored because driving isn't part of a 14-year old's reality. Similarly, telling 16-year-olds that long-term marijuana smoking may cause cancer is information that they are likely to ignore because some urban youth don't believe that they will live to middle age, and thus long-term health problems aren't issues of concern.

Messages should also use language that is familiar to your urban youth audience. This does not mean using slang. Slang changes quickly and is often different among various groups and geographic locations. In addition, adult efforts to use slang are often considered inappropriate and condescending.

3 **Use credible messengers**

Be sure the person delivering the messages is viewed as a credible source among urban youth. The most effective way to identify a credible messenger is to ask youth who they believe to be credible. Although it may be easy to discount your audience's selection of credible spokesperson(s), using anyone other than the person(s) your audience deems credible is likely to result in messages that are ignored.

Youth are more likely to listen to people they know and respect, such as their peers. The use of peer models in social and

commercial marketing, especially socially attractive peer models, is an excellent way to gain the attention and interest of youth audiences. The attributes of socially attractive peer models may include good looks, a sense of humor, an outgoing personality, having many friends, being popular with members of the opposite sex, getting good grades, liking "cool music," and being good at sports and video games.

"Inner-city teens would be delighted to meet their favorite NBA star if he came to their school to speak against drugs. But they would discount the appearance as 'playing the game.'"

**The MEE Report:
Reaching the Hip-Hop
Generation, 1992.**

Again, ask your audience to identify the types of people they find socially attractive and enlist peer models who meet this criterion.

The use of "street teams" is a commercial marketing strategy that is successfully used in the music business primarily to create "buzz" about new releases. Street teams consist of youth and young adults who are members of the target audience, accepted

by the audience, and therefore have access that may not be available to people outside the target audience. These street teams provide excellent feedback about what's happening within the target audience as well as about the audience's reaction to the promotion and product because these are the youth who have access and can get the real story.

Street teams must be carefully developed, however. Teams are effective when they reflect the ethnic and economic demographics of the target audience, are properly trained to communicate with your target audience, and are used in conjunction with other communication strategies. Street teams should not be used in a vacuum.

4 *Consider all communication channels and formats*

Urban teens consume large amounts of media, but mass media isn't necessarily the best channel for reaching them with health-related messages. Urban youth are media savvy and as a result pull from mass media the information they need and those things that they find entertaining. Although

television PSAs aren't very effective with this audience, don't discount all mass media. Radio, especially programs produced by and for urban youth, have proven effective with this audience.

Urban youth attend three to four movies per month, according to MEE Productions, Inc., a communications firm that develops communication strategies for targeting urban populations. Thus movie theatres featuring films that are attractive to urban youth may serve as effective community channels for reaching this audience.

Urban teens are part of an oral culture in which interpersonal communication channels are most effective. Interpersonal communication presents an opportunity for the exploration of complex issues through one-on-one communication. Specifically, interpersonal communication provides urban youth the opportunity for the dialogue that is likely to occur around sensitive issues such as substance abuse because urban youth rarely accept information at face value.

5 *Present acceptable alternatives*

Present youth with alternative behaviors that they can use consistently over a long period of time. Youth don't want to know what not to do; they want to know what to do and how to do it. For example, youth participating in a focus group to evaluate a magazine indicated that it would be interesting if the magazine printed articles illustrating ways celebrities dealt with problems in their lives, especially drug usage. The appeal of this type of information was that it might serve as a model to follow when the youth in the focus group experience problems in their lives.

"The more the control rests in the hands of the consumer, the more difficult it will be to expose that consumer to traditional advertising messages. Remote controls, and channel surfing interrupt commercial viewing."

**Marketing to
Generation X, 1995.**

References/Resources

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. *Marketing to Youth Meeting*, June 17, 1998.

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. *A Focus Group Report on RETROspective*, December 1998.

Chambers, Veronica. "Now He's The Top Dog." *Newsweek*, June 15, 1998.

Krakowka, Lisa. "Takin' it to the street." *Marketing Tools*, September 1996.

Leland, John and Allison Samuels. "Taking to the streets." *Newsweek*, November 2, 1998.

Motivational Educational Entertainment (MEE) Productions, Inc. *L-Evated: the Blunt Truth (Issues of Importance to any Anti-Marijuana Campaign)*. Philadelphia, PA: MEE, 1995. 1-800-MEE-PROD.

Motivational Educational Entertainment (MEE) Productions, Inc. *The MEE Report: Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation*. Philadelphia, PA: MEE, 1992. 1-800-MEE-PROD.

Office of National Drug Control Policy. *The National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign Communication Strategy Statement*. July 1998.

<www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov>



*Please feel free to be a "copy cat" and
make all the copies you want.*

You have our permission!

This factsheet is one in a series developed through CSAP's communication team. It is designed to assist programs working to prevent and reduce alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use and abuse. We welcome your suggestions regarding information that may be included in future factsheets. For help in learning about your audience, developing messages and materials, and evaluating communication programs, contact CSAP's communication team at 301-941-8500.

Distributed by SAMHSA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD, 20847, 1-800-729-6686, TDD 1-800-487-4889, linea gratis en español, 1-877-767-8432.

Linda E. Bass, MPH
Project Officer
Acting Chief, Prevention Education Branch
Center for Substance Abuse Prevention

Ruth A. Marshall
Managing Editor