

How is Alexandria, VA, Using Text Messaging to Prevent Teen Pregnancy? – Video

Transcript

(Highlights from Becky Griesse's Presentation at the "Taming the Media Monster" Conference, June 26, 2009.)

Becky Griesse: ...we work collaboratively with youth and for youth uh, to help them achieve lifetime success. We do that through personal commitment and uh, through involvement, active involvement. And we do a variety of things uh, but most of what I'll be talking about today is creating and conducting uh, campaigns that use new innovations and technology and creativity to really reach out to youth uh, and engage them. So we started a teen text message line. This was in uh, two thousand six on the speaking end. Uh, it was created because of a phone line that, or a hotline that we had created. I wasn't there at the time so it's kind of historical background. Uh, they had created a hotline, but no one was calling in. They weren't getting any phone calls and at the time the uh, intern that was working with them was constantly on her cell phone, texting her friends and whatnot. So they put it all together and decided that text messaging might be the way to go and to reach more youth and sure enough uh, it...it has uh, been the way to do it. We do a very basic system, right...right now at this point, which we're looking to change, but I have a work cell phone. They have my cell phone number uh, and they send in a text message and I respond within uh, twenty-four hours. Uh, we advertise it as an information and referral line; not as a crisis line. Uh, within my office we also have a sexual assault and domestic violence program, which both have crisis lines so we want to differentiate between those uh, types of lines. It's uh, staffed by one person, me. Uh, it's uh, somewhat anonymous like Kevin spoke to uh, I think the youth think that it's anonymous, but that I really do have their cell phone. Uh, and

uh, and it's less uh, like you spoke about being able to call up on a phone and ask some of these questions that they're asking me is...is not doable for them so texting is, something that they can do. Uh, I receive about seventy to ninety per quarter uh, and so sometimes I'll get five or six a day, but other times I won't have 'em...have 'em for a couple of uh, a couple of days. And then I track the number of questions and transcribe, transcribe all the text messages. So how do we promote it? We do it through presentations. We're in the school system a lot and community-based organizations so we both verbally tell it, but we also make sure it's on all of our handouts. We have posters and postcards that were created by our graphic designer, who spoke with youth about, you know, the look and...and feel of those uh, items. Word of mouth is probably one of the primary ways uh—I had a friend who said that I should text you with this question uh, or I just texted this question, so forth. Cable ads were also very uh, popular for us. We were able to specifically have them within the City of Alexandria as opposed to kind of a wider disbursement and so uh, that was helpful. We have web site and uh, web banners that were created. This is just one of the examples of 'em where people can uh, can save them and put them on their web sites or Facebook page. We're still kind working on getting those out but uh, it's just another way and then, promotional items that we have. We all have pens that say, you know, "ACAP" or "The National Campaign." We just make sure that we have our text message line on that. Uh, and what kind of messages are we getting? In 2008, we had uh, some VCU grad students come to us and wanted to do a research project. They had heard about the text message and wanted to kind of look at it uh, so they did...did. They just transcribed the messages. They analyzed the messages and looked for topics, our uh, themes emerged. And what we found uh, kind of highlights what has been said throughout the day. Relationships by far was, is what they want to know about and uh, have the most questions about, so about twenty-five percent of our questions

are related to uh, relationships. And then the other ones are pregnancy, birth control, sexual decision-making uh, sexual behaviors and STI questions. So what follows are just some of the uh, the questions that I received uh, as you'll see...you know, what is the difference between love and being in love? I get that a lot. Uh, when should you have sex? Or my boyfriend wants us to have sex. Should I have sex? Uh, the last example is one that uh, will be in my lessons learned. Sometimes it's really hard to figure out exactly what they're asking or what they're trying to say. Uh, so I...I played around with that one. Uh, and these are just some of the other kind of basic questions, some of which are much easier to answer. (Laughter) Some of them are ans, easy to answer. Uh, some of them are hard to answer. All the relationship questions and sexual decision-making questions are the harder ones. You know, where can I get an STI test or I uh, where can I get a pregnancy test? are very simple questions to answer and they only require one response. The uh, questions about relationships and decision-making and communications require a back and forth and more of a conversation and those take longer to uh, respond to.

...lessons learned uh, one is the text lingo. Uh, I thought I was...I was young and hip and I'm not as young and hip as I thought. And so there are often times where I get, you know, a shortened word and it could be multiple things and so I have to check in with them and I have to ask them, what does this mean? Uh, because there could be a difference between a boyfriend and a boyfriend or a boy...a boyfriend or best friend if they're putting "bf" and what does that mean? Uh, so I ask. Uh, I also do uh, need more staff to do it. While I'm not completely bombarded right now with text messages, we really want it to grow, but to be able to do that uh, I need more than just me. And uh, I need it to also be computer-based and not cell-phone based. Uh, and TV ads were the best way to reach our audience. They're also the most expensive way for us to reach our audience. So we're trying to balance uh, balance doing the TV ads and

the...the money aspect of it. Uh, and the schools have also been very uh, helpful with this.

...moving forward, we are gonna be moving towards, or hopefully moving towards the computer-based system where multiple people can check and respond to the...to the e-ma, to the text messages as opposed to just through a cell phone. Uh, it will also able, allow us to check zip codes and where they're calling from uh, and also be able to connect it to like Facebook and our web site so people can send in questions. Uh, we're also gonna combine efforts with other youth-prevention-focused areas. So we have a substance abuse coalition and a gain-prevention task force. We're all trying to reach the same youth. And these youth have questions about all of those different areas and so combining our efforts so that we're each putting out the same line and information uh, and there's just one number that the students or youth have to contact.