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ABSTRACT

Peer helping has recently been adopted by many schools, but use of these services remains mixed. The different ways in which peer helpers can be selected are described and examples of effective programs already in place are offered. The two types of cognitive processes used to evaluate advertising campaigns--automatic and strategic--are discussed and the three stages of the cognitive advertising process--attention getting, learning, and attitude formation--are likewise detailed. To find out whether advertising a peer helper program will increase the use and familiarity of students with that service, a study was conducted at a medium-sized public high school. It has been shown that familiarity plays an important role in advertising and it was hoped that advertising would increase students' use and familiarity of a peer program. To advertise the program, lists of peer helpers were placed in homerooms. Students (N=122) were then surveyed on their awareness of the program. Results indicate that although advertising did not elevate usage, familiarity with the program did increase. There was a correlation between knowing a peer helper and thinking the program is good for the school. It is suspected that the advertising was not as salient as it could have been. Contains 15 references. (MKA)

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Promoting Awareness of a High School
Peer Helping Program

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The popular and beneficial method of peer helping has recently been put into practice in schools everywhere. By using such a method, students are given the benefit of help with personal problems, while at the same time allowing teachers to carry on with performing their usual academic tasks. In addition to this reason, there are many incentives to carry out such a system. Such programs help to make schools peaceful places where a higher quality of education can take place. The program also assists in showing students how to deal with problems more effectively on their own (Johnson & Johnson 1994).

At an age when students with problems find it harder to communicate with adults about these problems, peer help has become an advantageous way to discuss problems and opinions. According to Rhyan Kyle of Bellevue High School, peer helpers "are taught to help us with our problems, listen when no one else will, provide support for our lives, and hopefully build a foundation in people's lives where there isn't one" (Internet). When problems arise in the home, children and adolescents aren't always comfortable talking to a professional counselor, who is most likely a complete stranger. Also, talking to someone older may make a younger person feel threatened. Thus, a peer helper has an advantage due to age similarity.

People of the same peer group tend to gravitate towards one another naturally. As in cases with making friends, children tend to associate with people more their own age. Concerning friends, they can serve as an unbiased and unthreatening third party. Even children that have a good rapport with parents can sometimes have problems about which they wouldn't feel comfortable talking with their parents. According to the Pennsylvania Peer Helpers Association (1997), peer interactions are powerful influences on a person's development. It is through peer interactions that critical social skills, creative and critical thinking, friendship skills, as well as attitudes and values are formed. Research has also shown that peer relationships serve as a frame of reference for self-identity.

Peer helping is based on the theory that young people, when properly trained and supervised by professionals, can effectively help their peers both individually and in groups (PPHA, 1997). Peer helpers are chosen in many different ways. Often students and faculty have a vote as to who will be trained for the positions. The qualifications for becoming a peer helper at Bellevue High School include "lifting others spirits and giving out a free hug" (Internet). Benson and Benson (1993) advocate a selection process in which high school students nominate peer helpers; those students with the highest numbers of nominations are selected for training. It is likely that this selection process will involve student leaders from all groups within the student body. Burrell and Vogl (1990) suggest several different criteria for selecting peer helpers. School faculty are directed to look for assertive, leader types, usually from large families because they are already skilled communicators. Potential peer helpers are not always model students in the way of grades and attendance. In some cases, peer helpers are volunteers rather than selected for the position. Students are generally evaluated before assuming the task, no matter what the selection process might be. Some important traits looked for would be a helper's interpersonal skills and if any hidden agendas can be detected. Finally, a peer helper's patience and sense of humor can be the key to success in a peer helping incident.

Knowing the hypothesized benefits and selection process, one may see how the implementation of the program is beneficial. Hugill, Hindmarch, Woolford, and Austen, (1987), carried out a quasi-peer helping program for students with social difficulties in a secondary school. The program provided an opportunity for the school and Social Services to join forces in helping the troubled students. The group sessions were put in place to provide alternate strategies in dealing with difficult social situations, to increase students' ability to accept and benefit from criticism, and to help students express their feelings and needs (Hugill et al, 1987).

According to Lieberfeld (1994), peer helper programs can help to reestablish norms of nonviolence and respectful communication between groups that have called these norms into question. The group work allowed the students to express their feelings and gave them the security of having someone in authority hold their concerns as important. Since the program

provided essential mediation for the opposing parties involved, student met peaceably in neutral settings which eventually led to several reconciliation (Lieberfeld, 1994).

A final example of the possible benefits of a peer helpers program would be the national problem of suicide among adolescents. According to Dunne-Maxim, Godin, Lamb, Sutton, and Underwood, (1992), the national suicide rate markedly increased for youth between the ages of 15 and 19 years and is the second leading cause of death among adolescents in the United States. With the use of a peer helper program, early signs of suicide will be detected in time to refer the student to professional adult caregivers. A peer helpers program could benefit a school in the event of an actual student suicide when a postvention plan is of the utmost importance. In this instance, the goal of the peer helpers program is twofold. The first goal helps identify and refer for services those individuals at risk for suicidal behavior or other maladaptive coping responses. The second helps survivors of suicide and friends of victims to adaptively cope with their loss and facilitate healthy grieving process (Garfinkel 1989).

Peer helpers serve as a caring force by promoting self-dignity and by empowering others to help themselves. Peer helper programs have been proven to be effective in raising academic achievement, in preventing drug abuse, and in providing a climate necessary for positive social-emotional growth. By helping others, peer helpers also increase their own self-esteem, leadership skills, and personal functioning (PPHA, 1997).

To successfully implement such a program, insight into how adolescents presently handle conflicts and how they should handle disputes were acquired. Previous research by Kristel and Young (1996) showed that the top five reported problems in a typical suburban high school were achievement, stress, drug use, friends, and family. To deal with these problems the majority of students reported seeking help from friends (52.4%), parents (13.9%) or a combination of the two (13.7%) (Kristel & Young, 1996). This tendency to seek out peers for help lays the theoretical supposition that a peer helpers program, correctly implemented in the high school, can build on existing helping networks to further assist high schools.

Although anecdotal evaluation of peer helping programs provides encouraging support for the effectiveness of these programs, there is little published quantitative data on the effectiveness of peer helper programs. Therefore, a comprehensive research method using both archival data and self-report measures was used to measure the effectiveness of a peer helpers program.

Two types of cognitive processes are used to evaluate advertising campaigns, automatic and strategic. Automatic processes are unconscious, and deal with "the recognition of advertising stimuli, the relevance decision that determines further higher-level processing, the retrieval of information, and the provision of a heuristic for brand evaluation" (Grunert, 1996, p 88). Strategic processing is conscious and includes

"learning and inference formation" (Grunert, 1996, p.88). Processing of advertising stimuli incorporates both of these types of processing, and the degree of involvement of each is determined by the characteristics of the advertisement.

The first stage of the cognitive advertising process is attention getting. The context of the advertisement is an important factor in the ease of getting the reader's attention. If an advertisement is placed in an appropriate context, the context can actually "prime" the attention getting mechanism. For example, an advertisement for motor oil placed in a car magazine is going to attract the unconscious attention of the reader more easily than had it been placed in a gardening magazine. This is because the readers is already thinking about cars from reading the magazine, so the motor oil advertisement fits in well with that cognitive set (Grunert, 1996). For new and/or vague advertising stimulus, automatic stimulus recognition tends to fail. Since they are new to the viewer, more of the advertisement's attributes must be picked up by the viewer's attention, whereas in unconscious attention getting, subconsciously seeing the logo will trigger recognition, even if the viewer does not remember seeing it (Grunert, 1996).

The second part of the cognitive advertising process is learning, which entails "changing associations between cognitive categories" (Grunert, 1996, p. 97). Grunert asserts that the higher the amount of connection one feels to an advertisement, the more learning will take place about the product or service. This amount of connection can be classified as the match between the cues in the advertisement and the cognitive categories of the viewer. Also, more learning will take place with an increased number of exposures to the advertisement, since only a limited amount of learning can take place for an ad with a limited exposure time (Grunert, 1996).

The third stage of cognitive processing of advertisements is attitude formation. Based on the model of automatic and strategic processing, Grunert contends that "the higher the degree of personal relevance of the product or service advertised, the more strategic processing will occur during brand evaluation and the less stable will the effect of the advertising on the attitude toward the product or service advertised be" (Grunert, 1996, p.98). Also, "the higher the degree of familiarity with the product or service category advertised, the less strategic processing will occur during brand evaluation and the more stable will the effect of the advertising on the attitude toward the product or service advertised be" (Grunert, 1996, p. 98). Grunert is making a case for the strength of familiar brands in the marketplace, and is saying that those brands may not be the ones consumers are most connected with.

Another common effect of advertising viewers is the third person effect, where people think of themselves as less affected by the message than others would be. Research by Gunther and Thorson (1992) has also shown that people tend to significantly overestimate the amount of influence persuasion has. The effect of advertising relates to social desirability theory by Tetlock (1985), which has three parts: "a) identifying what is socially

desirable behavior, b) claiming it for one's self, and c) discounting the socially desirable behavior for others as a way to maintain the relative superiority of self" (as cited in Gunther & Thorson, 1992). People would like to think that what they purchase is a result of their needs and wants, rather than by the influence that advertising has on them.

Advertising research has also shown that familiarity has an important role in increasing memorability of a brand. Consumers are more likely to recall product information of brands that they recognize and the loss of the information about those products is less affected by competing advertisements (Kardes, 1994; Kent & Allen, 1993; as cited in Kent & Allen, 1994). The purpose of Kent and Allen's study was to replicate the findings of Keller (1987) and Burke and Srull (1991), who found that exposure to advertisements for dueling brands results in remembering some of the same product information for each. Kent and Allen were successful in replicating this effect.

Jones (1991) collected data on 142 packaged-goods brands to determine if their advertising campaigns were successful. Seventy percent of the ad campaigns did in fact boost sales of the products, with a strong effect in 30 percent. Forty-six percent of the brands experienced a long-term boost in sales. All in all, Jones found that advertisements are more effective if run infrequently over long time periods ("It's official...", 1995).

This study hypothesized that the use of advertising for a peer helpers program will increase the use and familiarity of the students with the program, along with the students' attitudes towards the program. Although the researchers would not like to see the use increase past the 20% use by the general population of mental health services, there is the potential for growth of the peer helpers program within the school.

Method

Subjects

One hundred and twenty-two high school students responded to a survey administered in a medium-sized public, suburban high school. Of the respondents, 64 were in ninth-grade, 50 were in eleventh-grade, and 8 were in twelfth grade. The male to female ratio was fairly equal in that there were 56 females and 64 males surveyed. Most subjects could be classified as coming from middle to upper class backgrounds.

Questionnaire

The self-report questionnaire was designed to assess the benefit of advertising in raising awareness of the peer helpers program. The survey questioned if the students knew a peer helper, if they knew of the program, if they made use of the program, and if they thought of the program as a benefit to the school. There were three sections to the survey: the first section consisted of demographic questions, the second section asked about the level of awareness of the program, and the third was an opinion based section asking if the students felt the program was useful to the student body. (Fig. 1)

Procedure

The survey was administered to the student body during the morning homeroom session. Of the possible questionnaire administration periods available throughout the day, this was considered the best because in homeroom, students are likely to be alert, attentive, and a "captive audience," entertaining fewer distracting thoughts (as opposed to a questionnaire held later in the day).

Since the desire for social acceptance often leads people to respond to personal questions in a way they believe others would approve, the questionnaire was administered anonymously, with individual responses remaining confidential. Although gender can influence the results of a study, the overall sex ratio as the high school was previously determined to be close to a 1:1 ratio, ensuring that an approximately equal number of males and females would be surveyed.

Results

Several significant correlations were found. First, a significant correlation of .23 ($p < .05$) suggested that those who think the program is good for the school (question 11) and more likely to know a peer helper (question 10). Second, there was a correlation (.22; $p < .05$) between use of the peer helper program (question 6) and favorable attitudes about the program (question 11). Third, a significant correlation of .39 ($p < .01$) was found between knowing a peer helper (question 10) and awareness of the list of peer helpers in the homerooms (question 7). Finally, a correlation of .27 ($p < .01$) was found between having a friend who uses the peer helper program (question 9) and thinking the program is beneficial for the school (question 11). A correlational analysis was also performed on the items assessing the use of the program and the awareness of the list in homerooms, but this was not significant. This indicates that the hypothesis of the appearance of the list in the homerooms leading to increased use of the program was not supported. A t-test compared the amount of program use during Spring 1997 and during Fall 1997; no significant differences emerged. This indicates that there was not an increase in the use of the program during the period following promotional efforts.

Discussion

The hypothesis that the use of advertising (placing lists of the peer helpers in homerooms) would increase usage of the program was not supported. This could be due to the fact that the advertising was not as salient as it could have been. Also, teachers may not have alerted students to the fact that there were lists of peer helpers to assist them with their problems, leaving students to find these lists on their own.

Although usage of the peer helpers program did not increase after the appearance of advertising in homerooms, the familiarity with the program did increase, as shown by several of the significant correlations. The correlation between knowing a peer helper and thinking the program is good for the school could be

because knowing who the peer helpers are assisted the students in judging the worth of the program. Also, the correlation between knowing a peer helper and knowing about the list, increased the familiarity of the program within the school because having the list of peer helpers allowed the program as a whole to become less of a secret within the school. Students may have realized that they did in fact know one or more of the peer helpers, and hence felt more comfortable with the program.

The next set of significant correlations dealt with those students who actually used the program. The first association was seen between students' friends using the program and the belief that the program is good for the school. This indicates that since students saw the program was good for their friends, they generalized that benefit to the entire school. Finally, there was a significant relationship between direct use of the program and satisfaction. This indicates that those who had used the program expressed more positive attitudes about its value for the school.

Future studies might obtain more contemporaneous measures of user satisfaction in order to assess program effectiveness more accurately.

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