



PREVENTION UPDATE

New Technology Tools

Using Social Media for Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Violence Prevention

Overview

In 2004 Facebook (then known as TheFacebook) was launched as an online social network service that focused on building and reflecting social relations among students at Harvard University. It was expanded to other colleges and universities before opening to anyone aged 13 and over. Facebook now has more than 500 million active users (70 percent outside the United States) and 50 percent of active users log on to Facebook in any given day. Other popular social media technologies include MySpace, a social entertainment destination; Twitter, a real-time information network; YouTube, a site to watch and share originally created videos; and LinkedIn, a professional development site. Most social network services provide means for users to interact over the Internet, such as e-mail and instant messaging.

According to *Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next* from the Pew Foundation, while 41 percent of the general public in a 2010 survey said they had created their own profile on a social networking site, such as Facebook, MySpace, or LinkedIn, 75 percent of Millennials (18- to 29-year-olds) have created a profile. According to the report, Millennials outpace older Americans in virtually all types of Internet and cell phone use. They are more likely to have their own social networking profiles, to connect to the Internet wirelessly when away from home or work, and to post video of themselves online. In addition, significantly more Millennials than members of any other generation use their cell phones for texting. Millennials who have attended college are more likely than those who have no college experience to be online, use social networking sites, watch and post video online, connect to the Internet wirelessly, and send and receive text messages.

When it comes to using social media technology for alcohol, drug abuse, and violence prevention, Thomas Workman, at Baylor College of Medicine's John M. Eisenberg Center for Clinical Decisions and Communications Science, points out that social media is interactive. "That means we communicate in a very different way, which poses a challenge for people in the college prevention field who have relied on one-way social marketing or substance interaction to communicate prevention messages. Social media is fundamentally interactive, which means that I am entering a conversation rather than a declaration, and I'll get responses that may contradict my message. But how that conversation goes has great preventative power even though there is no message control. One of the most important ways to use social media is as a listening and engagement tool. That doesn't mean just lurking on social media sites to see what people are saying. It means putting out inquiries that let us listen to responses with some real intent to understand the culture. It means that we jump in when appropriate to other conversations and take up debates."

For Workman, these conversations and debates through social media "seed" public thought. "Prevention advocates add another voice into the conversations about substance use and associated behavior, which can have a tremendous impact on the culture itself. For example, in the early days of Facebook at the University of Nebraska, there were over 500 Facebook groups that involved some form of college drinking and partying. That has changed dramatically. Now an Internet search on the topic 'college drinking' brings up as many prevention entries as the blatant party drinking posts. We have learned that when we seed conversations across various social media groups, our seeds have as much influence as every other comment. By being in the conversation, we change the conversation."



Social media technology can be very useful in supporting community prevention coalitions. Workman said that a coalition’s presence online in a community is powerful because it does exactly what social norming is designed to do. “It says there are people who are thinking about ways to address alcohol, drug abuse, and violence collaboratively in a community. It changes the nature of online community because online community develops an awareness of that presence and that presence always has an influence on the larger environment.”

What the Evidence Tells Us

No research has been conducted on the use of social media as a tool for alcohol, drug abuse, and violence prevention. However, findings from a study conducted by the Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media at Michigan State University “demonstrate a robust connection between Facebook usage and indicators of social capital, especially of the bridging type. . . . Online social network sites may play a role different from that described in early literature on virtual communities. Online interactions do not necessarily remove people from their offline world but may indeed be used to support relationships. . . . In addition, Facebook usage was found to interact with measures of psychological well-being, suggesting that it might provide greater benefits for users experiencing low self-esteem and low life satisfaction.”

The study “Social Media Use in the United States: Implications for Health Communication” found that “. . . social networking sites attract the largest portion of Internet users and are likely to continue to grow, making them an obvious target for maximizing the reach and impact of health communication and eHealth interventions.”

Lessons Learned From Colleges and Universities

Michigan State University’s social norms campaign has a Facebook page that is driven by a group of people who are online peers. It has a large friend collection. But not all the interactions are alcohol-based social norms. People are “friending” the page to see posts on their wall that may have nothing to do with alcohol. For example, the social norms campaign mascot is a duck, so during a big snowstorm prevention staff put out a post asking people to make a snow duck and take a picture of it and post it on the page, resulting in the posting of snow duck photos.

The Illinois Higher Education Center for Alcohol, Other Drug and Violence Prevention’s mission is to “reduce negative health & safety consequences to Illinois college students related to alcohol, other drugs & violence & to increase college & community environmental factors that support healthy and safe norms.” Its Facebook page lets people know about upcoming training events, provides discussions on topics, and displays photos from activities.

Higher Education Center Resource

- [Webinar: Using Social Media Strategically for Effective Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence \(AODV\) Prevention](#)

Additional Resources

- [CADCA's Social Media Digital Primer](#)

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